edo, ergo sum

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Summary

An AU where Will is a serial killer and Hannibal is working with the FBI to catch him. Based on a kink!meme prompt. Hannibal is still a jerk and a sociopath, merely made a different decision re: that whole murder thing. Will is a copycat with artistic flair and far too many people-eating dogs.

Chapter 1

The air is perfumed with the stink of anxiety. Of low self-esteem. Frankyln Froidveux is not a puzzle that's difficult to solve, at least not in the simplicities of establishing a diagnosis. Treating that diagnosis is a different matter. Hannibal watches him as his emotions spill over as messy tears, quickly mopped away by tissues from the box held between his knees. It is not an uncommon sight during their sessions. He is aware of feeling a faint disgust, but discards this as unworthy of him. Franklyn is certainly not to blame for his problems, and as with all his patients he has a genuine desire to help him get past them.

There is a vast gulf that separates one person from another. A veil of flesh and bone that masks thought, emotion, one's inner life; it renders others down into an enigma, a code cracked by knowledge, solutions becoming manifest in body language or spoken words of lies or truths. In his youth it was difficult to conceive of the independent existence of other humans, that they were people like himself, with their own minds and desires, but he has since learned better, with time and experience. He is capable of seeing them, at least in the abstract.

Others might see Franklyn as pitiable. Hannibal has little patience for this. He did not want pity in the orphanage as a child, and pity would not afford any help to Franklyn now. It is not an emotion he believes in, and thus he has never made the time to learn to mimic it. It is better to simply acknowledge the difficulties his patient has with daily life and work to find ways to remedy this. It is better that emotion does not come into it.

Having finished his consultations for the day, Hannibal bids Franklyn a congenial goodbye, moving to escort him out. He is aware of the way the man leans into his touch, his hesitance at the door. Attachment to one's therapist is hardly uncommon, as he himself would know, but Franklyn takes it to unhealthy extremes. It has been the cause of many referrals in the past, but since he will not admit the problem it has been impossible to resolve. Still, finally he departs, and Hannibal is left in peace.

He returns to his desk to complete the notes for his sessions today. His memory is such that he would have little need for such things outside the necessities of medico-legal practise, but to find a place for them in the mansion of his thoughts would merely create a clutter of sheer banality, and the idea is simply abhorrent.

Perhaps half an hour passes before a knock at the entrance interrupts him. Hannibal sets down his pen, considering. There are a limited number of people it could be, but given the latest headlines on Tattlecrime.com, he has his suspicions. His hobby, as he likes to think of it, of consulting for Agent Jack Crawford of the FBI, was initiated several years prior by his protégée Alana Bloom, whom he remains rather fond of. He suspects if he were other than he is these feelings would manifest more strongly, but for him the mere existence of such things has always been theoretical, with what would otherwise be entirely overblown reactions of the general mob of humanity his only evidence of his difference from them. Still, when Alana had put the possibility of consulting to him it had been intriguing, raising memories of old, long-past ambitions, and he has little desire to refuse her any reasonable request. Because of

this connection, and because he finds Agent Crawford himself somewhat blunt and unpolished, most of his requests come through her.

Indeed, his suspicions prove correct. Alana is waiting for him, a file folder tucked under her arm and a winning smile on her face. “Hannibal, good to see you,” she greets him, coming inside at his invitation.

“It has been too long,” he demures. “My stock of beer is quite piling up.”

“So I should really make a date to come over and drink it?” she replies, eyes twinkling.

“Nothing would please me more.”

“Well for now I have something for you that’s a little less pleasant.” Hannibal accepts the folder she hands him, opening it to find the collection of photographs, reports, and various conjectures that he was expecting. “Another girl was reported missing this morning,” she says, her eyes crinkling in that way that speaks of empathic pain, felt with emotion rather than logic. “Elise Nichols. She’s the eighth.”

“Jack has had no luck thus far,” Hannibal remarks, spreading portraits out across his desk.

“It took some time for someone to even establish there was a pattern and pass it on to the FBI,” Alana sighs. “No bodies, no evidence, just missing person reports from Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa. Reported generally on Mondays, but last contact anyone can find was the Friday before.”

“Taking his time covering his tracks. A careful hunter.”

“And that’s why we need your psychiatric expertise,” Alana says, smiling. “Without a profile we might never narrow things down enough to find the evidence we need.”

“I am always happy to help the Bureau, of course,” Hannibal says. “I will look this over tonight and come to Quantico tomorrow. Though there is one thing that I can say, which no doubt will already have occurred to Jack; this is about one girl in particular. An archetype of whom these are reflections. Perhaps she was the first, or perhaps he is working up to her. Perhaps she is unobtainable. I will be able to tell you more in the morning.”

“Thank you Hannibal,” Alana says. “Hopefully with your help, we won’t make it to number nine.”

Agent Jack Crawford’s office is his war room, his place of power. His rational, organised, straight-line way of thinking is reflected in the careful arrangement of case evidence in clear view; maps, timelines, a conglomeration of what is known. And unfortunately for all concerned, what is known is very little. Hannibal arrives feeling somewhat apologetic. He has not been able to piece together as much as he would like, other than perhaps more details along the lines of his earlier comments to Alana. Without seeing what is actually done to the victims it is exceedingly difficult to come to any conclusions on the psychology of their

killer. It is a blow to his pride and Alana's faith in him that he is not able to give Jack any better news.

"We're grasping at loose ends here Dr Lecter," Jack tells him. "I've even tried again to get Will Graham out of the classroom, but nothing I say can budge him."

"You have mentioned Mr Graham before," Hannibal says. An interesting person, from what he has heard. Alana knows him, but has been reticent to speak of him, in an attempt to separate her personal feelings from her professional curiosities. Indeed, he had been an FBI Special Investigator for a time some three or four years ago, for another Homicide team, but found it inconducive to his mental health. Hannibal can hardly fault him his priorities, and it is somewhat gauche of Jack to keep pushing him as he does, for all the help he might theoretically be.

"We're visiting the Nichols household in two days," Jack says. "I know your schedule doesn't leave much time for fieldwork, but I would appreciate your input."

"I would like to attend," Hannibal replies. "Given that I have been little use to you thus far, I would hope to remedy that. I am sure I can rearrange my diary to suit."

"Thank you Doctor." Jack sighs, rubs a hand across his mouth. "The team is flying out in the FBI jet. I'll forward the flight details to you when they've been finalised."

Immediately upon entering the house Hannibal is aware that something is wrong. It is not possible at first to identify what that is, which irritates him. He listens to Jack interview the girl's parents whilst attempting to isolate whatever sensory input he is putting together as animal instinct, the product of hind-brain and sub-conscious processing data more efficiently than his super-ego. Their words, filtered through extreme emotional distress, are helpful only for their daughter's psychology.

A scent, he thinks. Something very faint in the air, only just detectable even by his particularly exquisite nose. He follows it subtly to the foot of the stairs before it is recognised, sliding into place as a gaseous corpse surfacing from a river's depths. It is the smell of death.

"Agent Crawford," he says quietly. "A word, if you please."

It is unfortunate for the mental health of the parents that further investigation indeed reveals Elise Nichol's body in her own bed, once taken and now returned, laid down to tender sleep. It contains a curious calm, Hannibal considers, viewing the scene dispassionately. Were it not for her pallor and the faint scent that perfumes the air, the very earliest trace of decomposition and trickles of shed blood, she might almost be sleeping, trite as that statement might be. This is no show. She is not displayed. There is no message here, merely an attempt to remedy her death for reasons that perhaps time and further investigation will make clear.

Jack Crawford calls for the trio of crime scene analysts, who have come all this way despite the hope of not being needed. The wait for them allows Hannibal further consideration of the scene.

There is a slight, sharp tang of urea from the bed-sheets, which means she was killed here, the animal functions of her body taking over at the point of death. It would have been quick. There is no cruelty here. Minimal signs of a fight, since even a careful murderer would have found difficulty concealing them all in the time he had, and there had been no sign when local police had examined the house earlier in the day. Hannibal does not think them quite so incompetent. Therefore he was gentle, therefore it is not the act in itself that drives this man, but the meaning behind it. A beautiful thing – and a victim is always a thing, are they not? – escapes his grasp until death crystallises it in a single perfect moment.

Little wonder the bodies have never been found. He will keep them to himself, in one way or another.

But there is something about this young woman that marred his plan, his needs, his pattern. Quite what Hannibal cannot yet see. Perhaps she is his archetype, and yet he thinks not. He goes closer, inhales deeply. Another layer, beneath floral perfume, soap, shampoo, dried fear-sweat. It is another death, one he has smelled many times before, as a young man and then during his internship at Johns Hopkins. Cancer. A waste, in one so young. Perfection marred? Yes, but also… He frowns. The thought and conclusion retreats just out of reach as though his own mind shies away from it.

Beverly Katz, Jimmy Price and Brian Zeller are not long in arriving, and the scene is soon taken over by them before he can force whatever the sub-conscious truth out into the light. He is content in the moment to watch them work. Ms Katz has a brash manner, but is very intelligent, and oddly charming. Hannibal often finds her refreshing. James Price is competent and dull and beneath his notice. Brian Zeller on the other hand is prickly, rude and unpleasant. Unfortunately Hannibal has yet to think of a subtle way of ensuring he is fired without it being traced back to him. Really, he reminds himself as consolation, it is beneath him to consider it. Bedelia would not be pleased with him.

“Nice to see you out and about, Dr Lecter,” Beverly greets him, letting Zeller take his photographs before flipping back the sheets. The blood-scent becomes stronger. Six wounds are revealed, marking Elise Nichol’s nightgown like roses in bloom. Post-mortem. The wounds are round, and placed with care. No wild knife-stabs of mutilation. Perhaps there *had* been a display, a personal one.

“Something in there,” Beverly says, frowning, reaching forward with tweezers and an evidence bag held at the ready. “What... is that *antler velvet*?”

“It is,” Hannibal agrees, stepping forward to look at it more closely. “Traditionally antler velvet is believed to have healing properties in Chinese medicine. Likely our killer placed it there himself.” Another method through which an apology is made. “Bruising around the throat,” he gestures. “It is likely that strangulation was the cause of death.”

“We’ll sweep the room for prints, hair and fibre etcetera,” Beverly tells him, “then get a body-bag up here to transfer her back to the Bureau. You need to look at anything else before

we start to move things around?"

"Although first impressions are important, I do not believe we will come to a valid conclusion before all the evidence is in hand."

"You riding home with us?" she asks. "Only we'll be a few more hours yet, and it's getting late enough that Jack might just have us hole up somewhere for the night with Elise in the local coroner's office."

"I was intending to," Hannibal admits, with a slight creep of irritation starting to buzz under his skin. He prefers things to be planned out in advance, although where control can be maintained, spontaneity can also have its perks. "However I have responsibilities to my practise in Baltimore. It seems I must arrange my own flight tonight."

"Just feel free to charge it to the FBI's dollar," Beverly says, grinning. He returns the expression with a slight tilt of his lips for the sake of politeness. This trip has turned out to be more inconvenient than anticipated, for everyone concerned.

As much as correspondence, shopping and the other daily necessities of life must be dealt with, Hannibal makes time to attend the autopsy-debrief of Elise Nichols. He has been considering their killer, in the short span since leaving Minnesota. He has curious motivations. He is not driven by hate or bitterness or rage. He takes because he is consumed by a poisonous form of love. And why not? When battered by the storms of such powerful emotions the weakness of the soul, the mind, is uncovered by simple erosion. Deeps and darkness and buried things are thrown up into harsh light, and made manifest through actions that create the mirror of their ugliness in the world. Humans are very ugly creatures, for the most part. Hannibal likes to think that in his various vocations he has done something to excise that ugliness, or remould it, or have it locked away with others of its kind to fester as rotten things do.

He has begun to compose his written report for Jack, but it will not be complete until the secrets that Elise Nichol's body might hold have been uncovered.

Laid out bare on the cold steel table, it is difficult to see Ms Nichols as anything more than the meat she has now become. The animating force has flown with the last of her breath, and a murderer has transformed her into whatever talisman or symbol eased the fires of his heart. Now her wounds have been measured and probed, her ribs split, her organs assessed, weighed and measured as though in judgement at the gates of the underworld, and he merely waits to hear the result of it. Once, a very long time ago, a process such as this had uncomfortable associations. It made him uneasy and fascinated all at once, a stranger in his own skin. Familiarity had settled his bones and belly, in the end. He had become able to bear the chill of the morgue.

James Price reports the lack of any useful prints, which is much as Hannibal suspected. Their killer is both meticulous and cautious. Their only clue is thus that which Beverly found; the small shaving of metal on the nightdress. Plumbers, steamfitters, tool-workers, blue-collar

men with a certain aesthetic. A hunter in more than metaphor. The wounds are spaced in the pattern of antlers, not just tended by them.

“It is likely she was mounted in order to drain the blood,” he suggests, when Beverly raises the question.

“Her liver was removed,” Brian says. “He took it out, and then, yeah, he put it back in.”

How does a hunter honour his prey? How does he cherish and respect it? Hannibal already knows the answer to this question. His conscious mind can no longer ignore what the sub-conscious has known for all too long. Suddenly it is very cold. From very far away his pulse bounds and rushes like foaming cataracts. His arm aches where it was once broken and set too late. He has never had the full range of supination. His mouth is dry and yet he tastes faintly the most delicate meat that ever passed his lips. His stomach churns.

“Why would he cut it out if he was just going to sew it back in again?” Price wonders.

“Please, excuse me,” Hannibal says, turns on his heel and flees for the restroom.

When he is in control of himself once again Hannibal gathers his strength enough to rise from the cold tile floor, brush dust and dirt from his trousers with a sigh of distaste, and leave the cubicle to rinse his mouth out at the sink until the sour taste has left it. The scent lingers, bitter. He inspects his hands. They are steady. Pale white lines of old scars mark them, but they are his hands, adult hands, not those of the freezing child starving to death in the woods. The ghosts have retreated, returning to oubliettes where they should have rotted, becoming only old worn bone without animus or power.

In the mirror his reflection is paler than he’d like. His hair has fallen a little out of place, but it is easily enough fixed. Unwelcome emotion churns feebly beneath his ribs. He has no wish to analyse it, not in the present moment. Bedelia will carve it into logic for him so it can be digested. Although it has a wild strength which he is utterly unaccustomed to, manifesting in physical reaction, it does not master him, nor will it ever.

He has apologies to make. Excuses. The idea is distasteful. Revealing this vulnerability he’d thought long since scoured clean... but although a direct lie would be rude, he might still mislead around the truth.

Hannibal is just about to exit the restroom when someone else comes in, very nearly colliding with his shoulder before side-stepping away. He apologises, sounding distracted. They are around equal height, although the stranger seems smaller than he ought due to the manner in which he holds himself. He is wearing a dove grey suit jacket, not tailored, but not ill-fitting. He does not make eye contact, avoidant with ducked head and thick-rimmed glasses, letting his gaze fall somewhere around Hannibal’s chest. Then he pauses, cocks his head very slightly like a hound hearing a sound in the undergrowth.

“Dr Hannibal Lecter,” the man says, reading from the visitors badge clipped to his lapel. “You’re one of Alana’s friends, aren’t you?”

“I am,” Hannibal replies. “But I am not quite sure which of Alana’s many friends you might be.”

“She probably hasn’t mentioned me.” A rueful twist of a smile, one with sharp edges. “But then again, I’ve heard one of her colleagues has been working with Jack, so if that’s you then I’m sure you’ve heard the rumours.”

“Then you must be Will Graham,” Hannibal says, now quite sufficiently distracted. He has been very curious about this man. Despite the temptation of sitting in on one of his lectures, without an invitation it would be rather the breach of etiquette. He is aware of the gossip. They say that Will Graham is not quite sane; that he is brilliant, that he is capable of placing himself into the mindset of a killer so completely that he understands them in ways no moral person could. This is foolishness. The motives of most murderers are utterly banal; jealousy, greed, hate, petty sadism. Will Graham has a gift of empathy and perception, that much must be the case. If what he sees so clearly others do not, it is only because they do not look.

If Will Graham is unstable, then surely this only speaks to his convictions of right and wrong. If these petty passions disturb him, then it is because he has codified the moral laws that society makes so very strongly into his sense of self. Hannibal has heard enough, yes, and has sifted what he is sure is the truth from the dross of the unenlightened. This man is a singular individual, and he would very much like to see if his conclusions are borne out by the truth of him.

“I am,” Graham says, maintaining that knife’s-wound of a smile. “Alana’s talked about you. She says you’re very good at what you do.”

“I merely hope to be some help to the FBI,” Hannibal demurs. Will Graham looks momentarily thoughtful, but returns quickly to discomfort. It seems he is not comfortable with small-talk. With socialisation in general, it is likely. Too many sharp-toothed shadows clustered inside the bone arena of his skull, casting themselves over everything he touches.

“Sorry, I’ve kept you from... whatever it was you had to get back to,” he says.

“Nothing to apologise for. It was a pleasure to meet you.”

Will Graham laughs. “Now you’re just being polite.”

“Not at all.” He reaches into the inside pocket of his jacket for a business card. “If you ever want to become better acquainted. God forbid two of Alana’s friends become friendly.” The other man takes it. His gaze flicks first to the word *psychiatrist* printed beneath Hannibal’s name. “In a purely personal capacity of course,” Hannibal adds.

For the first time in their conversation Will Graham looks him in the eyes. “Perhaps I might.”

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

> Warnings for PTSD things related to Mischa backstory, debatable food hoarding (not that Hannibal would ever admit that's what it could be), murder, human and animal cruelty.
>
> In which Will gets a dog, Hannibal is triggered, and Will decides to poke at his vulnerable spots.

Dr Hannibal Lecter is a very interesting man. Alana has mentioned him once or twice in the past, and Will has made a point of keeping an eye on what Jack Crawford and his team is up to for his own self-preservation, so is aware that he's been consulting for them for some time. He'd been very... refined. Polished and polite, but Will had caught him off his guard, although the walls had come up quick enough. That was one thing they had in common.

Will is aware of Dr Lecter's reputation for intellectual brilliance. His profiles have helped catch several killers whom Will has gone on to talk about in his lectures to the FBI's own bright young things. Just from reading his reports, borrowed for academic purposes, he knows Lecter understands death, understands murder and the drives that lead to it, understands that humans are not so very far gone from their animal ancestors. That understanding is very cold. Very logical. It is not the same as Will's, who knows these things intimately because he has felt them time and time again, as he looks, and *sees*, and slips into another's self.

It can be as simple as meeting their eyes, or as involved as a crime scene, retracing steps and motivations, a re-creation in body and blood.

When he looked into Dr Lecter's eyes though, he didn't see anything staring back. It makes him curious. What is he hiding that would be so obviously *wrong*? What must be so strongly held in check? What sort of animal is he?

Thoughts to keep Will busy as he heads back to Wolf Trap at the end of the day. He's so caught up in them that he almost doesn't see the dog trotting along by the side of the road, fur matted with mud and camouflaging him against the darkness of long autumn nights already drawing in. He drives on a little further before he stops and waits, treats ready to persuade him that Will is a human to be trusted. It's the same long but rewarding process that it always is, but at the end of it the too-thin mongrel is happy to eat from his hand, happy to allow him to touch, to receive affection it looks like it's been a long time since he had.

Will picks up the trailing end of the rope around the dog's neck. Worn through and snapped. He'd been tied up somewhere for long enough that weathering and pulling to get free had

finally unravelled the last of the fibres.

“Hey Winston,” he says, “What do you think of that name, Winston?” Winston pants at him, tail wagging. Will runs a hand along his side, feeling the jut of ribs. “Looks like I’ve got a new lure to set up, huh?”

Even people who mistreat their pets often want them back if they run away, if only to take out their anger on them. It’s only cruelty coming around to bite them back if calling the number on the posters Will puts up leads them to a meeting that’s a trap, and then to a property he owns in a name other than his own. A place they won’t be coming back from. In a soundproof basement there are some very small cages, and some chains, and muzzles, and nutritionally insufficient kibble, and a scant, stagnant water supply. He cuts out their tongues now because he got tired of their begging a long time ago. It takes them a long time to die, so sometimes he can get two at once. It doesn’t take much prompting to make them fight to the death. A bottle of clean water. A pre-packaged sandwich.

Not that Will only ever kills people this way. This is more of a side-line, his own Tartarus of appropriate punishment. His main form of enjoyment is through the most brutal kind of art. It is death, the inevitable end to the cycle that all things go through, and he has always been drawn to it. True crime novels as a child, fixated by the words of men who did the most terrible things, trapped like a butterfly pinned with the needle of his understanding, because those words gave life to emotions he had never felt before, terrifying in their unfamiliarity. These killers had given rise to beauty as they saw it, and so to him it became beautiful too. It had led inevitably to his time with the police in New Orleans, where he had quickly come to understand that not all murderers were alike. Husbands killing wives, an argument influenced by drugs or alcohol with an ending not intended by any party, an adulterer slain, a child beaten or neglected too long. And he slipped into each of these minds and saw it as they had seen it, but it never held that same pull, that same fascination.

So he had gone instead to college, to Georgetown, to study profiling and psychology and forensics and soak up the sort of kills that called to him. Because each time he understood the killer, he understood the victim as well, felt as both felt, *fear terror pain* warring with *power control hunger lust*. He saw not only terrible evil, but utter ugliness, and transcendent wonder. It created in him a tension that he found addictive between his own disgust and self-disgust, and the joy and enjoyment and need. His emotional state became a balance between them, a harmony blended from the minds he saw into, and his own self.

So now every week he teaches death, and every death the FBI investigates surrounds him, and he deals out death when he finds one that’s worthy. He creates beauty and he creates horror. He mirrors, but when he kills it’s a dialogue, and a criticism, and he puts himself in alongside the killers he copies. No-one has yet seen the difference, but he doesn’t do it to be seen. He does it for himself.

Hannibal’s next appointment with Bedelia Du Maurier is not for another week. It would not be rude to call and ask to reschedule it sooner, it is merely that Hannibal does not believe it to

be necessary. His previous reaction was merely an isolated incidence brought on by the unexpected. He is now fully aware. Memory will not take him off his guard again.

And yet when he puts a seasoned roast of beef in the oven that evening, the scent that soon begins to perfume the air causes a sudden lurch of nausea. Once again he perceives the phantom pain and cold, returning through the long years. Remembers the flash of golden hair, a little shivering body tucked into the futile protection of his childish embrace. The echo of her laughter, the stumbling way she tried to say his name. It aches, a dull strange pain that won't quite leave. But it does not have the strength it did in those early days, or at the orphanage after. Time has dulled some of its teeth, but he has made himself a new life without pain or distress, and he wants nothing of this in it. He leaves the kitchen for his cellar, shuts all the doors tight between them to minimise the spreading aroma. He takes stock of his supplies: hung chorizo, mettwurst, teewurst, swojska, salumi; salt barrels packed with pork and beef; sauerkraut and kimchi; various achar; jars of sun-dried tomatoes in oil; anchovies, mussels and crab in brine; wheels of Stilton, Roquefort, Gruyere, and Brie; sacks of oats, and wheat and barley flour; root vegetables; smoked fish. Checking it over in an orderly fashion has a calming effect. The wine is stored in its own temperature and humidity controlled room upstairs. There is a small walk-in freezer down here also, but he does not like to rely on it. All is as it should be.

When he judges the roast to be done, he returns upstairs. He's not willing to get rid of it; he abhors waste. Instead he steels himself, tamps down the nauseous roil that spreads toxic under his ribs, retrieves and carves it quickly without even letting it sit as it should. The meat weeps clear juices, is pink and tender within. The colour is not quite the same, but memory paints it lighter, the cross-cut fibres of fascicles recalling those he pulled apart with sharp milk-teeth, stomach clamped tight with hunger and half-delirious. Supping soup-stock from a bowl, nourished with marrow, while the men gnawed scraps from slender bones with animal fervour.

Hannibal manages to force the thoughts away, so enlivened with the sense-memory they bring with them, as he packs beef into Tupperware for the freezer, locking it with its scent beneath thick plastic. He is aware that his respiratory rate has increased, the rhythm of his heart also. Somatised dread. Beneath wool and linen a cold sweat beads his skin unpleasantly.

And yet he still does not want to call Bedelia. To do it now would be an admission of weakness, an admission that the ways she has helped him in the past have been insufficient, criticising both her abilities and how he has adapted her lessons into his life. He can wait. This will pass.

Although he has banished most of his hunger with the eidolon of that winter, he makes himself a salad anyway, forces himself to eat it. To be empty and aching in the night, even if sleep makes him unaware of it, is likely to precipitate further recollections. There is already a chance of nightmares – he must resign himself to that – but he will not make them any more likely than they must be.

The case is not yet over. This cannibalistic killer still hunts freely, consuming love, and the thought of it awakes anger. Hannibal must see this through, see the man caught if only for his own peace of mind. He's an animal, rabid, an abomination. He resurrects an anger that

Hannibal decided long ago not to tap into, but nothing before has ever shaken it in its chains. He is not sure what he would do if faced with this murderer. The opportunity for revenge had been taken from him before but what if it presents itself again?

A choice may once again force itself to be made.

The latest case that has Jack Crawford and his minions all abuzz involves eight missing young women, or rather, seven missing, and one returned. Rumours have been flying around the halls of the FBI, and scraps of the truth have even made it as far as TattleCrime.com, which Will has always found a useful source of information. Freddie Lounds' sources are not always legitimate, but what she squeezes out of them is trustworthy. It there are pictures, if the details are enough, then he can draw inspiration from them and use them to step into the shell of a killer's skin, and if not, then he is patient enough to wait and get such things when they are released to the teaching side of the FBI, which only requires him to be more careful in ensuring his recreation is never found.

On this occasion Ms Lounds has persuaded some member of Duluth PD, who can't now have much hope of keeping his job, to tell her an awful lot. There are pictures of the latest victim taken from a cell phone, a description of the body and the scene and the wounds and even a little of the conclusions about it all that this individual had overheard from a well dressed, distinguished FBI consultant. That would be Dr Lecter, of course.

It is not a complete picture, but it's enough of one for Will to start getting a feel. This one interests him. It might not have, if it weren't for this latest scene, this apology. It changes the character of the man they're looking for, from the ordinary predator of women filled with hate and denied lust and seeking power that he might have been, to a loving psychopath who wants to possess his victims in an entirely different way.

But what Will can make out is still fuzzy and indistinct. He needs to know more to bring him into clear focus, sharp-edged, so that he might perceive the beauty of this killer's design and feel it surge within himself and rebirth it in the world, feeling the edges of the art made physical through him translated. The desire itches under his skin, hollows out an empty aching place that must be the drive that motivates these murders. He won't go to Jack for information, because he won't give him that temptation to try and drag him again too close to things, too close to the centre where he will be watched, where the risk is too great. But another avenue has already been opened up to him. Dr Hannibal Lecter has invited him for conversation.

The business card is still inside his wallet, flat and unblemished and scented faintly of something darkly musk and slightly feral. Will smiles as he dials, feeling the pleasant heady buzz of anticipation already beginning to fill him up.

Dr Lecter greets him at the door of his spacious home, near a mansion by city standards, with a small smile and a polite greeting. He is as sharply dressed here as the last time Will saw him, making him wonder if he even owns any casual clothes. The thought of him in a sweater

or jeans is utterly foreign, even having barely known him. It wouldn't fit the image, clearly so carefully cultivated. Will himself feels somewhat out of place in plaid flannel, his usual scruff of stubble and wild curls he cuts perhaps only once every three months. He brought a bottle of wine because it seemed the thing to do, but it's not an area he knows much about, and it probably isn't up to scratch. Still, Hannibal takes it with a word of thanks and nothing else to be read on his face.

They go through to the kitchen. Will glimpses a dining room with a long table, a veritable garden of herbs on one wall. He thinks that if they are eating – and dinner had been mentioned during their phone call – then that formality might be a bit much for two, but then everything about this man is formal. He finds the kitchen more comfortable. Pale walls, grey wood, dark fittings, monochrome prints for decoration, it might feel clinical were it not for the sense of life that seems to seep from every surface. This is a loved place. Perhaps too loved for a stranger to simply wander into. He lingers in the doorway whilst his host moves around, checking on culinary particulars.

"I hope you do not object to a vegetarian meal," Dr Lecter says.

"I wouldn't have taken you for a vegetarian Dr Lecter."

"Hannibal, please." Will risks meeting his eyes momentarily. Still they run deep. Still they are nearly empty, but not quite entirely. It is not that there is nothing there at all, but that it is strange enough, foreign enough, that Will is unable to get a good grasp on it. It is like looking into mirrored metal, reflecting back muted blurs. "I do not shun meat, but it is not necessary for it to be present in a meal. An exquisite culinary experience can still be had, the more challenging for the chef in its limitations."

Why does something about that ring a little false? It's all entirely true, Will's sure, but is it the *whole* truth? He wouldn't care enough to pry with most people, wouldn't turn the brunt of his empathy upon them, but since he is here on the trail of a killer it seems appropriate. Hannibal Lecter understands murders. Will Graham would like to understand him.

"So really what you're saying is that you're trying to show off," he suggests. Hannibal lets out a chuff that from him is probably as good as a full-blown laugh.

"That urge is one I cannot deny," he replies. "Tonight I've prepared onion squash and sage ravioli with chanterelles, Japanese artichokes and pine nut beurre noisette, and to follow, Valrhona chocolate crème with caramel sauce, salted peanut ice cream and chocolate jelly."

"Wow," Will says, honestly impressed and feeling his eyebrows raising of their own accord. "That's uh... that's a little more fine dining than I was expecting."

"If you would care to go through to the dining room, I shall plate up," Hannibal says, sounding pleased.

Will takes his seat as directed, and tries to relax into the shadowed atmosphere of the room. Before long, soft classical music begins to play, something he doesn't recognise but pleasant all the same. Then Hannibal reappears with warm plates and the kind of artistic arrangement

of the food on them that's not usually seen outside of an expensive restaurant. This is clearly a hobby he's very passionate about.

It tastes just as good as it looks. "Do you cook like this for everyone you invite over to your house?" he asks.

"For my friends, and those I hope will become friends," Hannibal replies.

"Friends like Alana Bloom?"

"Of course. I will have to thank her the next time I see her, for facilitating our acquaintance."

The placid pleasantness of it sets Will a little on edge. It's simply because it is so rare; he can count on one hand the number or real friends he's ever had apart from his dogs, and although he's not the most social person ever, that lack is only halfway attributable to him. He makes people nervous, as he's well aware. They fear the way he can slip into the heads of killers – which he can hardly fault, considering that he *does* murder people from time to time. Instinctually, they can sense the animal dichotomy inside his skull, all those predatory ghosts prowling the thick jungle of thoughts. But Hannibal has no fear. Nor, in the way that Alana does but tries not to, does he analyse Will's mentality, trying to fit it into the little boxes of pathology that their profession has taught them.

Some of this must show in his face. "I apologise if I've made you uncomfortable," Hannibal tells him. "I find you interesting, and would like to get to know you better."

"I'm just not used to seeing that from people," Will replies, choosing to be honest. "I'm suspicious of the motives of psychiatrists."

"That's understandable. Our lines of work have the commonality that we both will meet a lot of them; you must have been surrounded in Georgetown. Most psychology departments are full of personality deficients. Thankfully Alana and I would be the exception."

"Provided you don't try to analyse me, I think we'll get on fine."

Another thin sliver of a smile. A Hannibal smile, Will is already starting to call them inside his head. "I cannot turn that part of my mind off completely, no more than could you yours. Still, we can socialise like adults, with the discretion that implies."

Hannibal apparently finds him just as interesting as Will finds *him*. He is hardly ordinary, not in his lifestyle, or his intellect, or his hobbies, or in whatever secret he is hiding beneath those layers of plate armour, walled up in stone forts in the recesses of his skull. And they have shared interests, in the work of the FBI, but are not so closely involved in that to have professionalism get in the way. It won't be possible – and yet there is this niggle, this feeling that somehow there is a chance – for Will to ever share the whole of his self with this man, but what friendship might be found is worth pursuing.

For a little while, there is silence, the comfortable sort, while the music plays on, and their knives and forks clink gently against their plates. It feels somewhat gauche to bring up the

topic of murder in such a genteel environment, but Will can't deny his own ulterior motive, though he feels a little guilty about it after Hannibal's overtures of friendship.

He swallows another delicious mouthful, sips from his glass of white wine – the name of it already slipped from his memory, unlike images which scorch themselves there never to be forgotten – and asks casually, "So, how is this latest case of Jack's going?"

The reaction is quite unexpected, and yet subtle enough that if he hadn't been paying attention he would have missed it. Hannibal's fingers tighten on his knife, shifting their grip subtly so that it no longer looks like an eating implement but like a weapon. His jaw clenches in a little flicker of motion, and in the depths of his eyes – eyes which Will has been willing to meet uncharacteristically often – the curtains are pulled back to reveal something animal in its glorious rage. There is something dangerous lurking inside Hannibal Lecter, and Will has the sudden urge to pull it out into the light.

All this quickly subsides though. Hannibal takes a moment to collect himself by stopping to taste his own wine, sniffing delicately from the glass, and then all is smoothed away, returned to serene control. "It proceeds," he replies, with a non-committal levelness of voice that is quite astounding. "Little more to be said for it."

"I imagine I'll be teaching about it once it's all over," Will says, continuing the nonchalance. He wouldn't want to reveal that he saw through the mask, if only for a moment. "Cases like this are meat and drink to the FBI trainees." Was that a flinch on the word meat? He casts the lure further. "They can't get enough of it. *Lap* it up." Yes, just the slightest shiver breaking through that iron self-control.

"You assume we'll catch this killer."

"I have faith in Jack's team – and in you of course. I think everyone at Quantico knows how much help you've been, now and before." He pauses. "I suppose if it weren't for Jack hounding after me at every opportunity, I could prepare for those few lectures ahead of time. It's impossible to go and look at the files without him breathing down my neck."

Will can see the sense of obligation, of hospitality even, forcing the words out of Hannibal's un-eager throat. "I can bring them over to your classroom tomorrow, if it would be of use."

"I would appreciate that very much."

"A pleasure to help."

And perhaps then I'll find out what about this case bothers you so much, Will thinks to himself.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

In which Will has Plans, deductions are made, and Hannibal is disappointed that Bedelia doesn't have a magical anti-PTSD wand.

Warnings: imprisonment and torture, feeding people to animals, feeding people to people

Disclaimer: I am not a mental health professional, and am not claiming that this is a 100% accurate description of an individual experience of PTSD, (mostly since if PTSD improves without therapy, I don't know that it can 'come back' because of a specific trigger) so if I've made any major mistakes or written something offensive, please call me out on it. (This goes for things in general, and for any constructive criticism you care to give).

Will's second property is in woodland near Great Falls Park, on the Potomac River. The day after his dinner with Hannibal, once he has finished his lectures for the morning and the favour of the case files has been delivered, he drives up there to check on his latest victim and read things over surrounded by silence and privacy. It's a pleasant journey, clouds scudding across a pale blue sky interrupting the wan autumn sun and its fading heat. The tops of trees shiver in the breeze and the roads are nearly deserted. People have other things to keep them busy on a weekday afternoon.

He reaches the house around four o'clock. It's a small single story building, set off from the main road on its own winding dirt track, sunk back into forest and surrounded by wild undergrowth. It had been run-down when he'd first bought it, but he'd had fun fixing it up. The promise of the files calls to him, but he has a few things to attend to first, one of which waits down in the basement behind doors chained shut.

Will unlocks the heavy angled external doors, letting them fall aside with a metallic clank that's swallowed up by the woods, knowing there's no-one here to hear it. The light-switch is by the bottom of the stairs, and flicking it allows a single old bulb to pulse on, illuminating the surprisingly expansive space. There's a row of four cages tucked against one wall. One is occupied. The man is naked, forced to curl into a ball by the lack of space. There's a strong piss-smell, and a little puddle just outside the confines of the welded iron where he'd managed to aim it. It still tracks back towards him though, trickling over the rough concrete floor.

The man is shivering, and flinches when the light comes on. He cranes his head up, blinking, looking at Will pleadingly. Old blood is crusted about his mouth, and he moans something that probably would be begging if he could still form words. His lips are cracked, and his

eyes have that sunken quality of dehydration. Will smiles. He remembers how thin Winston had been, how skittish and shy at first, and righteousness burns warm through him. He doesn't want this man to die yet though. He needs to starve first. He goes back outside to where a barrel stands, catching a certain portion of the rainwater diverted from the guttering, and dips a little plastic bowl into the stagnant water. The weather has been dry recently. He takes it downstairs and places it within reach of the cage, steps back and watches as the man grabs it and tips it to his mouth with shaking hands.

That will keep him for a little longer. Will switches off the light, chains the basement back up, and goes inside to look the files over. Once he's done, he'll fetch several meals worth of meat from the big freezer for the dogs and head back to Wolf Trap. He likes to give the rescued strays a high protein, natural diet, and if that diet happens to be part made up of what's left of their old masters, then so much the better. Those bones which are too large for their teeth go weighted into the river, with no flesh to rot and release gas that might make them rise and reveal their grisly glory.

He spreads the photographs out on the pale pine surface of the kitchen table, thinking about meat and consumption. The appearance of the girls, repeated again and again, he knew already, and he had heard about the latest crime scene, if not seen these pictures of it. She is so peaceful, lying there. The best apology their killer knew how to make. He can feel himself dropping down into that mind, obsessively taken over by love and the threat of the loss of it, breathing himself out and breathing murder in. He envisions himself in that bedroom, standing over a mirror of the perfection that should be his, fastening his hand rapidly around her throat, choking the life out of her as quickly and mercifully as he knows how. She dies, and in death is his.

But there had been something wrong. Will frowns, slipping back into the physicality of his own body, sitting down with the rays of the evening sun falling on his face, creating patterns of randomness through the blinds, moving gently with the passage of time. He turns his attention to the autopsy photos, to the report that goes with them. Hung, bled, liver removed and replaced and... oh.

Will smiles, a bearing of sharp white teeth. He recalls the animal behind Hannibal Lecter's eyes, its ferocity and hunger. He knows from whom this typed revelation came, even were it not credited to their 'psychiatric consultant'. The all consuming love roars wild and panicked beneath his skin, as in his mind he honours and cherishes these girls, symbolic kin, and eats and crafts and uses all.

The taboo of cannibalism. Hannibal had shied from it, been affected by it enough to give up meat for the moment. It's not squeamishness. He'd been a surgeon; the concept of humans as simple flesh, organic and vulnerable, is hardly foreign to him. No, there's some other reason behind it all, and Will is now very eager to find out what that reason is.

He knows just the way to do it. To communicate as well his own insights about their killer, to give Hannibal a gift, repaying the minor debt of allowing him to get under this murderer's skin. Will Graham will help the FBI find the man they seek, and perhaps in doing so he will see if Hannibal lets out the beast he has caged inside. And will that beast be beautiful? Will it create art? Will it last, or burn itself out in a single act?

Finding out will be his design.

Meeting Will Graham for a second time had been an experience marred by too many reminders of the past. Still unpleasantly vulnerable, still with chinks in the persona Hannibal has so carefully constructed over the years, it had been increasingly hard for him to maintain control. It is intolerable, to be so affected by perfectly innocent conversation. The next day after the long drive to Quantico, he is aware of the way he is watched by Price, Zeller and Beverly Katz. He had brushed off his previous reaction, but it was still uncharacteristic of him, and they know this. It cannot now be undone.

Thankfully, Jack Crawford is unaware of it. He merely welcomed the insight Hannibal had thereafter provided, although with so little physical evidence and such a wide geographical spacing of victims, they are not that much closer to making an arrest. Hannibal notes that he is still angry; the up-swell of the unfamiliar, repressed emotion washing in strange foreign tides at the back of his mind, keeping him on edge. Momentarily he will forget it, but never for long. It has put him on edge so that he has become too alert in his startle response, heightened instincts of aggression, loosening long-learned associations of others as people, and not simply objects to be used or discarded as fits the situation.

He remains at Quantico only for the time it takes to deliver the files to Will, and then he leaves, heading back towards Baltimore and his other responsibilities. It feels shamefully like escaping. He has never been one to run. Instead, he tells himself, it is a tactical retreat, to return when he has acquired a position of strength.

He tries not to count down the hours until he sees Bedelia again, but is aware that he remains distracted by that thought, by the psychological weight of this case. He is unable to give his own patients the attention they deserve. It is unfair to them. Nor can he ground himself in his own life via his usual methods. He still cannot abide the scent of cooking meat. The next event in the Baltimore Arts social scene is not for a month. There are no new exhibitions he has not already seen. His only recourse is to fill his house with music to sooth savage memory, and it is only partially effective.

The hand of fate – or of their killer – is not kind enough to allow him to reach Bedelia's door untroubled. He hears it first from Jack Crawford, who calls him in the early hours of the morning, apologetic at the need to wake him.

"I thought, given your interest in the case, you would want to see this," he says in explanation. "Another body's been found. Hibbing, Minessota. This one's... different."

Hannibal regards the scene with as little emotion as he is currently capable of. The tableau in front of him has an artistic flair that is not entirely in keeping with the methods of their killer thus far – now dubbed the Shrike by Tattlecrime.com. Hunters may make displays of their prey for the benefit of their ego, but that is not honouring as the Shrike requires. One might theorise a devolution of his pattern due to the frenzy of media attention this case is now

receiving, but equally such attention has spread details of his crimes to a wide audience. There is another hand at work here.

Agent Crawford fills him in on what has already been discovered. That this stag's head was stolen suggests a certain spontaneity in the copycat, or at least a willingness to make use of found materials.

"He took her lungs," Zeller says, sounding queasy. "Pretty sure she was alive when he cut them out."

"We are not looking for the same man," Hannibal says. "Our cannibal acts as he does out of a form of love, as twisted as that might be. He uses every part of his victims, because to do otherwise would be disrespectful, and to his thinking, monstrous. It allows him to justify what he does to himself. *This* killer is putting on a show. This is field kabuki, a puppet show designed for an audience."

"What audience would that be?" Jack asks.

"Perhaps for us," Hannibal replies. "Perhaps simply for the world at large."

Jack sighs, as though a heavy weight pressing down on his chest forces it out of him. "A copycat is the last thing we need."

"An intelligent psychopath, particularly a sadist like this one, will not make himself easy to catch. There was no hesitation here; the act of murder is not new to him. It is likely that he has killed before, perhaps in a way that has somewhere been noticed, perhaps not. Having made whatever point it is he desired to make, he will not kill like this again, not unless it somehow serves his ends."

"And what are his ends, Dr Lecter?"

Hannibal considers the question. "To be seen."

"Then perhaps he might *want* to be caught."

"Serial killers often do," Hannibal allows. "And if so, we must expect more bodies. I suspect however that he is trying to send a message of some kind. The significance of the differences in this murder, when compared to that of Elise Nichols, creates something like a dialogue. A critique. This killer considers himself an artist."

"So what is he trying to tell us?" Jack asks. "About the Shrike?"

Hannibal inclines his head in agreement. "A negative, revealing the positive." He considers what this copycat might be attempting to convey. In showing such a degree of distain, he emphasises the Shrike's love. And whom might be loved so very deeply at that age? A daughter. That is the archetype the Shrike wants to capture. She will be growing up, on the cusp of moving from girl to woman and thus leaving, no longer the beloved child he is trying so hard to hold on to. And why create this display in a place so open? Because the Shrike has

somewhere private to do his work; likely a hunting cabin far from civilisation, with an antler room for him to set up his personal tableaux.

He shares these revelations with Jack, mulls them over as the forensics team busies themselves with the corpse looking for clues that won't be found. The copycat is more careful than that.

He avoids contemplation of what might have been done with the lungs.

"I am aware of this latest case the FBI has you consulting on," Bedelia tells him, once the usual pleasantries are out of the way and their hour has officially begun. "Perhaps you might like to talk about it."

"It has revealed memories I thought long since forgotten," Hannibal confesses. "It has been unpleasant, remembering past hurts, psychological and otherwise."

"You have always been inclined to repress those parts of your past," Bedelia says. "Being forced to deal with them unexpectedly will always be more uncomfortable than doing so on your own terms."

"I find the recollections impinging on my day to day life. The sensory intrusions will be momentarily overwhelming, and I find it difficult to shake free of them. I have not been reminded in this way since I left Europe."

"If this particular case is causing you discomfort, my advice to you would be, stop," Bedelia tells him. "You are not beholden to Jack Crawford. I am sure you are already aware of the most likely diagnosis, and that it is not something for which I can offer you an easy answer."

Hannibal shifts in his seat. Intellectually he knows she is right, but he has not wanted to admit it. The less rational part of him has been thinking of how much Bedelia has helped him in the past and been expecting too much of her as a result. It would be unfair of him to expect her to do things outside the power of anyone.

"You have always been unwilling to speak with me about this part of your life in any detail," Bedelia continues. "It may help to think of this as an opportunity."

She may have a point. It has not previously been necessary to raise his ghosts in order to exorcise them, yet now they have broken loose and no longer answer to the iron of his will. But for all that her advice has always been of use, he is not willing to recluse himself from this case. His motives for that are... perhaps less than positive. It doesn't matter. He has already made his decision.

"I will take that under advisement," he says, although both of them know that is merely a polite way of refusing.

For the rest of the hour they revise methods of coping with negative internal states. It is not that Hannibal is not already aware of such things, but an outside perspective is always useful.

Knowledge of a thing does not indicate expertise at putting it into practise. It is much the same with understanding people, he reflects. Being able to manipulate them is not necessarily the same as understanding them.

“Hannibal,” Bedelia warns him as he leaves. “Don’t do anything... rash.”

“I make no promises I do not intend to keep,” he replies. He does not even know himself what he will do if the chance presents itself. He will act as he sees fit.

In the end Will has to search online to find out what to do with the lungs. It’s not as though eating organ meat is an entirely foreign idea to him, given his upbringing – his father had hunted occasionally, with rather the same philosophy as the man they are now calling the Shrike – but he never actually prepared any of it himself. Searching his old memories, tinged bittersweet, doesn’t give him the confidence not to ruin them. Given the liberties he took with the crime-scene, he wants this one particular aspect to feel true.

It was more of a personal touch than Will usually puts into his work. He had slipped into the Shrike’s mentality, understood everything he was trying to do, and done the opposite. It had been a contradiction that felt deeply strange, and also rather thrilling for all that. It was always important to do *something* different, to prove he hadn’t lost himself inside these other people, but never like this. The part of him that had been *other* had been screaming that everything he was doing was an abomination, but he had ignored it, used that outrage to discover little details he might otherwise have missed. Perhaps he even hewed closer to the killer he drew from, this way. Something to think about.

He hopes Hannibal appreciated it. It’s a pity Will couldn’t be there to see his reaction. He would have been able to understand him the better, in that moment. As it is he will have to rely on the echoes it leaves behind the next time he sees him, hoping to tease out the truth. It’s curious that Will feels so much of a connection to him, despite their brief meeting. It can’t be only because of what he has bottled up inside him. Well, Dr Lecter is handsome too, there’s no denying that, but it’s been a long time since Will has wanted to do any more with a man than just look, and given the environments he works in with their old-fashioned ‘values’, it hasn’t been worth the risk. He’s never been good at letting other people close, but he thinks with Hannibal he might be prepared to try.

It will all depend on the outcome of this case, really. As much as Will has felt, from time to time, as though he would like the pleasure of human company, he’s not willing to risk his freedom over it. But if he can bring out Hannibal’s potential...

He smiles to himself, grinding Cassie Boyle’s lungs into sausage. He’s never tried cannibalism before. This should be interesting.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

In which there is lots of Beverly, a chase, an unmasking, and an unexpected encounter.

Warnings: canon-typical violence

In lieu of any more evidence coming to light the FBI has begun its attempts at canvassing for leads based on the small shaving of metal Ms Katz found on Elise Nichol's nightgown. Hannibal calls her several days after the discovery of the copycat murder to enquire how the case is progressing, having heard nothing from Jack since he submitted his psychological report on the Boyle killing.

"We went out to a couple of construction sites around Minnesota that have used that type of pipe," she tells him. "And we've got a list of names, but that doesn't narrow it down much. I mean, I've been going through and ranking them on priority based on whether they were working around the time of each girl's disappearance, but it's going to be a lot of door to door work." She sighs.

"Any progress is still progress," he advises her. "If you don't mind, why don't I accompany you on a few of your excursions?"

"Surely you've got better things to be doing other than flying all the way out to Minnesota?" she says. He can hear the smile in her voice.

"Perhaps. We could be bored together."

"I know you call talking like that just being polite, but it still sounds like flirting to me," she replies, laughing. He'd had to disabuse her of that notion in the past. Although he is happy to call Ms Katz both an acquaintance and a friend, his interest in her goes no further than that.

"There's no flirting, I promise."

"Speaking of flirting though," Beverly says, "I heard on the office grapevine that a certain someone was seen in Will Graham's classroom the other day. I didn't know you knew him."

"We happened to meet. A chance encounter," he replies. He is cognisant of a strange emotion fluttering weakly around the pit of his stomach as the topic is brought up. He tries to isolate and analyse it, but it proves oddly elusive. "He asked me to lend him a copy of the case files for his class, in order to avoid Jack Crawford's attentions."

"I can't blame the guy," Beverly replies. "Jack's a steamroller when he gets started and he doesn't like taking no for an answer. Anyway, what did you think of him? He's cute, in an

unstable kind of way, don't you think? Shy, intelligent, good with animals, shares your interest in the minds of the criminally insane... what's not to love?"

"Ms Katz..."

"You know I've asked you to just call me Beverly about a million times over the last few years *'Dr Lecter'*," she says, in a teasing fashion. "At least, when we're not at work. But go on, play the formal card; shut off our bisexual bro-chat and stop all my fun."

"Beverly," he replies, although he finds he is smiling. "We were discussing a professional matter."

"Urgh, yeah, murder," she says. "Alright, if you want to waste your time and your ridiculous amounts of money. I'm going to see some guy called Garrett Jacob Hobbs in a few days if you want to come. I'll text you the address and pick you up from the airport whenever."

"Thank you Beverly."

The Hobbs residence is a spacious suburban bungalow set back onto woodland, nothing remarkable about it. When Beverly knocks on the door it is answered by a middle-aged blonde woman in cream slacks and a green flower-print top. She smells of rose hand soap and a floral perfume with notes of citrus which he tentatively identifies as *2012 Eau de Parfum*.

"Mrs Hobbs?" Beverly asks, displaying her badge.

"Yes?" she replies. "What could we possibly help the FBI with?"

"We'd just like to ask a few questions of you and your husband, if that's alright."

"Certainly. Please come in."

She leads them inside down a short corridor, calling for her husband. He comes up a wide staircase from the basement, a balding man in a hunter green plaid shirt and worn blue jeans, bringing with him the smell of chemicals often used in taxidermy badly covered by the overwrought medley of scents that makes up Old Spice Classic. Hannibal can't help wrinkling his nose slightly at the unpleasant combination.

"Amelia?" Hobbs asks. "Who are these people?"

"This is Agent Katz from the FBI and..."

"Dr Hannibal Lecter," he interjects gracefully. "Psychiatrist. I am a consultant."

"We just want to ask a few questions about a case that we're working on," Beverly tells him. "It shouldn't take up much of your time."

"Will you want to talk to Abigail as well?" Mrs Hobbs asks. Hannibal does not miss the slight change in her husband's body language. He had been wary previously; now he stiffens

further, and slips one hand with false nonchalance into his back pocket.

“Who’s Abigail?” Beverly asks.

“Our daughter.” She smiles, every bit the proud mother. “Just starting to apply for colleges. We’re very excited.”

Even had he not been highly suspicious before, that is enough for Hannibal to be certain. The fit to his profile is exact, and he is not the only one to be aware of that. Beverly exchanges glances with him, and he nods ever so slightly at the question in her eyes. She puts her hands on her hips, one of which rests on the butt of her gun.

“Garrett Hobbs,” she starts to say.

It happens very fast, but to Hannibal that speed is slowed down immeasurably by the sharp spike of adrenaline. Even so, he is not close enough to stop Hobbs as he pulls a hunting knife from his jeans, steps forward, and puts it against his wife’s throat. She lets out a small squeak, her hand flying up to hover over where the steel presses against her skin. Her eyes are wide and utterly surprised. Next to him, Beverly has her gun out, but Hobbs is too close behind his hostage, sure to put nothing of himself in the line of fire save his arms.

“Don’t come any closer,” Hobbs says. His voice trembles. Hannibal feels himself as a trap waiting to snap closed. He is poised, ready to move the moment an opportunity presents itself. An almost feral variation on the anger this case has forced him to become used to is percolating, boiling; its own steam-engine of energy.

“Garrett?” the wife begs. “Please, what are you doing?”

Hobbs begins to back away, pulling her with him. Hannibal mirrors him. He feels... unlike himself. He stalks forward and the polite veil of humanity that covers the empty parts inside of him is tearing and falling away like so much paper. His prey – the cannibalistic animal undeserving of personhood – retreats towards the door and the irrelevant thing in its arms sobs and leaks tears and fear-scent and simply *doesn’t matter*. For a moment the face he sees there is one from long ago, gaunt, cruel, and dead-eyed.

“Hobbs, don’t do this,” Beverly says at his shoulder, clear and sharp as glass. Each cadence of her voice is picked out in exquisite detail. Everything is; each sensory input a shimmering chime of information absorbed and catalogued. His awareness is perfect. “You know it’s over now, right? Threatening her is only going to delay it, and you don’t really want to hurt her.”

The door looms, a bright rectangle against which Hobbs is silhouetted. The man’s eyes flick sideways, turning his head imperceptibly to glimpse it via peripheral vision. Hannibal sees the decision crystallise in the subtle shifts of his face. The knife comes across in a gleaming arc and crimson follows in its wake, a dark and brilliant spray that draws a line across the wall and spatters tiny droplets on his skin like beads of dew or the ocean breaking against a nearby rock. He does not blink.

Beverly gasps. Amelia Hobbs, her eyes already glazed with the advance of inexorable death, is pushed forwards as Hobbs himself darts away, her limp body staggering and collapsing

into Beverly's shaking arms soaking her jacket and shirt in blood. It is too late for her; a diagnosis reached at a glance. He says as much aloud only for Ms Katz's benefit – he would not try to save her even if he could because he demands vengeance of himself, demands Hobbs and is not sure what he intends to do with him. Or rather, pretences aside he knows very well, but half of him lies wedded to that pretence and will not admit the truth.

Hobbs has a slight head-start, but Hannibal is quickly after him, and Beverly is not far behind. Hobbs rounds the corner of the house and runs towards the woods, fording the narrow stream at the bottom of the hill with a single leap. He jinks through the trees, and Hannibal hears Beverly swear, unable to draw a bead. This is pleasing. He needs to get close.

Hobbs is fast and knows the land, but Hannibal is faster. Not for nothing his early morning runs; he has always been athletically inclined, putting on muscle easily, with powerful lungs and excellent stamina despite the malnourishment of his youth. Rapidly he is gaining, and leaving Beverly behind. The distance closes.

Hobbs is not unaware of his pursuer. Hannibal calculates angles, intending a tackle, but before any move can be made Hobbs wheels, his knife flicking out wildly at neck height. Hannibal brings up an arm to block his, stepping forward with his right leg and the last of his momentum to channel the energy up through the rotation of his hip and into the punch he sends into the other man's solar plexus. The wind goes out of Hobbs with a cut-off exhale. He staggers back bent half over, but still with his grasp on the knife. Hannibal doesn't hesitate. A hand on the back of the man's neck brings his face down onto a raised knee, breaking his nose.

Blood spatters the wool of his trousers, but Hannibal finds the sight exciting rather than the messy offence it might otherwise have been. He is not entirely in control of himself. He has never felt like this before. He has never *wanted* to feel like this before, and maybe once it is over he will remember why, but for now he is caught up and the scent of victory is near at hand. His teeth are bared and his quickened breath is not all due to exertion.

Hobbs spits, holding the knife *en guarde*. His eyes dart to the woods behind Hannibal, where Beverly must quickly be approaching. There is not much time. Again the blade comes forwards, little quick strikes that Hannibal dodges with ease. He is waiting for the moment to present itself. The opening. A slip in the defence which will allow him to... there. One hand deflects the weapon across his body and to the side, forcing an overextension and loss of balance. The other wrenches the hilt from a suddenly half-numb grasp.

It is good sharp steel. When Hannibal drives it into Hobbs' abdomen between umbilicus and pubis it parts cloth and skin with ease to sink deep. Not fatal. No, not yet. Blood seeps out and wets his fingers, warm and sticky. The two of them are close enough that he can feel Hobbs' breath against his neck, panicked, harsh with fluid half-clotting in the throat. Muscles jump and spasm, locking around the blade and everything. Is. Perfect.

"Hannibal!"

The shout shocks him out of the state approaching a trance that had begun to overtake him. His head snaps up, and there is Beverly, still with gun drawn, staring in shock at the tableau before her. Hannibal blinks. Relaxes his hold and steps away to let Hobbs fall to his knees

with a grimace and spitting curses. The mask of his life in Baltimore shutters down over his face, over the backs of his eyes. He swims up through a sea of turbulent emotion that he has not the time to adequately pick apart, and becomes placid. Calm. Able to think like a human once again.

“Beverly, I...” Bedelia has, rather unfortunately, not taught him what one ought to say in a situation like this.

“What the fuck Hannibal, you *stabbed* a guy!” For all that, she still has kept her presence of mind, coming forwards and taking one hand off her gun to fish cuffs from her belt, snapping them onto Hobbs with commendable surety.

“He turned. Attacked me.” He is not entirely sure which show of emotion should be made to play across his features. He settles for mirroring her own. “It won’t be... fatal. Not with medical attention.”

“Maybe you should get on that then!”

“Ah, yes.” He fumbles in his pocket for his phone, calls emergency services first, then Beverly’s contact with local police. Estimated time of arrival is fifteen minutes, which will be entirely adequate so long as the knife is not removed or jostled. Hobbs is letting out harsh little pants, and the occasional moan which makes the part of him only interested in people as things to be experimented on prick up its ears.

“One of us should go back to the house,” he suggests. “It will be necessary to lead the emergency technicians here once they arrive.”

Beverly looks between him and Hobbs. She is concerned and disturbed, because of course this would be entirely out of character with the version of him that she knows. This is twice that she has seen more of him than is wise. He will be able to explain this away easily enough, but it might be necessary to start making contingency plans in case it happens again. Hannibal’s control of his mask is currently less than it should be, and he has no guarantees of when that control will return again.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to leave you alone with him,” is what Beverly eventually says. Pauses. “For one thing, you’re not armed.” It’s a polite excuse, which makes him feel rather better about her. It is always pleasant when people are polite. One of the things that separates them from the rest of the kingdom *animalia*.

Hannibal nods, turns and begins to make his way back through the trees. The other houses in the small suburban development are visible in a drawn-out line a little way off, ordinary and calm, unknowing what monster made its lair in their midst. Disgust manifests in the urge to curl his lip and bare his teeth at them, though this at least he *can* control. He does not want to think yet about what happened only minutes ago. If he had looked in a mirror during that pursuit, he is... *concerned*... about what might have been looking back. He is aware this potential has always been in him, that it is, in a very real sense, the reality of him, but one cold winter a lifetime ago when the roads had been impassable and hunger had been the master of all, any pretence of being something else had been stripped away, withered, burned, *boiled*. He has spent a very long time learning how to reconstruct that pretence. There had

been other animals in that forest with him that walked on two legs as he did, and *he does not want to be like them.*

The door of the Hobbs house remains open, wide and dark as a mouth. He can smell the blood from here. He is unmoved by it, but only because he is not the cause of it, because that woman's death is utterly insignificant to his life. He had been afraid, momentarily, that he would find himself excited by it, but why would he? It is irrelevant to him.

There is one more surprise for this day to present, though one which he ought to have anticipated in hindsight. As he nears, Hannibal hears that someone is crying. There is a young woman kneeling in the coagulating pool of blood, bent over her mother's body with her hands flapping uselessly like startled birds over the gash of her neck. He blinks. Understanding is quick to present itself.

"Abigail?" he says, softly. "Abigail Hobbs?"

She looks up at him, a pretty pale face reddened with her emotion; the tears that roll down her cheeks. "Why would he do this?" she asks. "Why would he kill her? He was supposed to kill me."

She is unaware or in no state to contemplate the implications of her words. She knew what her father was and what he has been doing. She is aware that she was his archetype, the one who inspired his actions. More than that, she is guilty. He does not have to be Will Graham to see that she has felt guilty for some time and has wished for an end to the situation she must have been trapped in. An accomplice. Bait.

Hannibal is no stranger to doing what must be done. Self-preservation is one of the prime motivators of humanity, and it would not be right to judge her, caught between aiding murder or being a victim to it. He feels neither sympathy nor kinship precisely, but a certain understanding. He crouches next to her.

"Your father has been apprehended," he tells her. "He will be put on trial for the murder of your mother and for many others. There is no doubt of a conviction." Not with two witnesses, both associated with the FBI itself. "Abigail, it is likely you will be called on as a witness. You must be more careful what you say. Do you understand?"

She looks at him with wild eyes. "I... I understand."

"Good. Now, come away from there."

He helps her to her feet. The knees of her jeans are wet and soaked with blood, her hands too. She holds them out in front of her as though they are not her own, but the implements of some stranger who merely happens to share the same space as she.

"Who are you anyway?" she asks him, with the detachment characteristic of trauma.

"I apologise. How very rude of me. I am Dr Hannibal Lecter, a consultant for the FBI. My associate Agent Beverly Katz is outside with your father."

“Is he dead?”

“No. I suspect he shall say he worked alone.”

“He did, Dr Lecter,” she says, and it sounds almost believable.

“With a little more conviction next time Abigail,” he tells her, and takes her through to the kitchen to wash her hands.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

In which Beverly Katz is never going to be killed by Hannibal Lecter, Bedelia disapproves, and Will is totally down with gutting cannibals.

NB: clarification; Beverly and Hannibal already knew Hobbs had a daughter, they didn't know she was a daughter about to leave the nest causing obvious abandonment issues. Also, previous veg dish stolen from http://www.pied-a-terre.co.uk/tasting-menu and the one in this chapter stolen from http://www.finedininglovers.com/blog/food-drinks/michelin-starred-vegetarian-recipes/

Naturally there are consequences. Most immediately, when the police who have been summoned ask the logical question of why the criminal they will be guarding on the way to hospital has a knife protruding from his abdomen. There is no easy answer to this question. Citing self-defence, while half the truth, is not inclined to ring true when he himself has not a mark on him. Any of his other motivations do not reflect well, nor has he the kind of authority of one who is actually a member of law enforcement, where the power of their institution and camaraderie lead to oft a blind eye when violence is used in the pursuit of crime. He casts about for the right words to say. Words have been faithful servants, tools to shape the world around him and inspire or provoke whatever the required action from others in it, but for the moment they have deserted him. If only he had not allowed his nature to get the better of him, surely the mask would work for him now as it always has in the past. Surely the words would come.

“Dr Lecter was the first one to reach the suspect,” Beverly says, breaking a silence that was stretching on too long for innocence’s sake. “I was a little way behind, but I saw the whole thing. Hobbs came at him with the knife. There was a struggle. When they broke apart, I saw that Hobbs had been stabbed – that was when I arrived. Dr Lecter is just lucky it wasn’t him that ended up like that.”

She is lying for him. Or at least twisting the truth, which for her is no small thing. He feels unexpected pleasure, or perhaps it is just satisfaction. This is one of the advantages of the mask; the benefit of the doubt bestowed by the masquerade of friendship. Still he was not expecting it.

“We’ll need statements from the both of you about the whole series of events,” the officer says – T. Urquhart, from her badge. “Normally we’d say not to leave the state, but given you work for the FBI, I don’t think there’ll be any trouble finding you.”

“That is very gracious of you,” Hannibal replies. The ambulance is about to leave, Garrett Jacob Hobbs handcuffed to the trolley inside. Officer Urquhart nods to her partner and they

head to join it. Others move around the house, securing it with tape. The body of Mrs Hobbs will remain in situ for the moment until pictures can be taken. Eventually she will be taken to the coroner's office, but for now she has become an object to be regarded, an installation in the gallery of death. As for Abigail, plans have been made for her to stay with a friend, although there will be questioning, investigation, other parts of the storm she must now weather.

"Thank you Beverly," he says, once there is no chance of being overheard.

"Yeah, well it *was* self-defence though right?" she says, albeit uneasily. "I only... it's just that I didn't see all of it. I mean I know you Hannibal. You're not the kind of guy who would do something like that otherwise. Hell, I didn't even think you *knew* how to fight!"

He makes no reply. Allow a person to convince themselves, and it is far more effective than any excuse that might arise from one's own mouth.

"You have been acting kind of weird though with this case," Beverly points out. "Weirder than normal for you, although I mean that totally with affection."

Hannibal raises an eyebrow slightly. It is a little rude to say that to a friend and colleague, but given the circumstances it can be excused.

Beverly sighs. Rakes her fingers through her hair. "It's not like I'm saying you should have just let him stab you or whatever, just... I don't even know. If it had been me, I probably would have shot him, that's why I *have* a gun in the first place, and then I'd have freaked out about it and would need a bunch of therapy on the FBI's dollar."

"You think I am unaffected?" Hannibal asks softly, injecting a note of pain into his voice. It is not artificial; he regrets his actions, regrets allowing natural instincts to rule him rather than maintaining his control. He does not regret that Hobbs was hurt aside from that. Complications from the wound may yet kill him, and Hannibal will feel no sorrow at that, and a great deal of pleasure, although it is far from the most likely outcome.

"Urg, I'm being a dick aren't I," Beverly says. "You know it wouldn't irrevocably damage your ice-king alpha male image to show an emotion once in a while though right? I don't know from being a shrink, but isn't repression once of those unhealthy things?"

"Only when taken to extremes." He allows himself a small smile. "But you have no cause for worry. Even would it not be required by the FBI after such an incident, I will be discussing this with my own psychiatrist in due course."

"Hannibal," Dr Du Maurier greets him with noticeable disapproval at their next session.

"Then you are aware of the denouement of the Hobbs case," he replies, hanging his coat up in the hallway. The chill of autumn is starting to make itself felt in crisp air and cool breezes. Even now he does not do well around cold.

“That was a loss of control I would not have expected from you.”

“It was also unexpected on my part,” Hannibal confesses. They make their way to their usual seats. The familiar, comforting scents of lilies, jasmine and vanilla fill the air around him, easing discomfort. He had hoped those moments of violence, unplanned and distasteful to his self image as they might have been, would at least be closure enough to banish the ghosts of his past once more. He has been disappointed. There have been improvements, but not to the level of his previous functioning, nor have his nights lost the feverish intensity of his nightmares.

“I have great respect for the amount of care you take,” Bedelia says. “It is rare for one who thinks as you do to want to treat people as... kindly... as you do. I might ask what about that has changed, but I think we both know the answer to that.”

Yes. It haunts him even now. “I was at all times aware of my actions,” he says, to forestall any thought that he might have been acting under the influence of a flashback that appeared more real than mere memory. Even if he had, placed in that scene as an adult experiencing the reality of a child, he is unsure it would have let him act. At the time he had recognised predators older and stronger than himself. He had fought only at the last moment, when a life was at stake, and it had been utterly futile. Struggle, in the years that immediately followed, had been therefore mental rather than physical.

“But were you thinking *clearly*, Hannibal?” Bedelia asks him.

“Perhaps not,” he allows. It is certain that were it not for the particular details of this case, it never would have happened.

“Is it likely you will fail to think clearly again?”

“No.” Of this much he can be sure. Hobbs is caught. The case is over. It may take time for things to return to the steady state they comprised for the past decade or more, but they will return.

Bedelia accepts this answer, and changes the thrust of her enquiry. “Given all that has occurred, it might be wise to speak in more depth about your past.”

Hannibal brushes non-existent dust from the knee of his trousers, unable to prevent himself from feeling uncomfortable at the suggestion. “That particular time is not amongst the reasons I see you.”

A hint of a smile twinkling in her eyes. “No. I am merely the tailor of your very well tailored person suit. Be that as it may, we have discussed your time in the orphanage afterwards, and your time in France, and your career since then.”

“I will consider it only if things do not improve on their own.” That is the most compromise he is willing to make.

Bedelia, at least, does accept it. Their discussion turns instead to topics which are of more use. There are rips in the veil, after all, which must be rewoven.

Tattlecrime.com is proving quite the propitious source these days. ‘Former Surgeon Slices Shrike!’, a headline in all caps, extra-large font, and a picture of Hannibal Lecter at some high society event, source unknown, looking very charming which it seems he’s good at. Yet Will can still see the blank depths of his eyes caught in glossy high-def. He smiles as he reads, feels actual shudders of pleasure run through him. He’d hoped, but never thought it would go as far as this. The animal broke free, ran down its prey, and sank its claws into his belly. That soft and tender spot that opens so nicely to the knife. If you’re very careful, you can keep them alive a while like that. He hopes Hannibal had been planning to. That he’d wanted to draw things out, throw in a little torture, perhaps a little mutilation. Will doesn’t yet know him well enough to read him, to see how he would enact his crimes, but he allows himself fantasies.

So the beast got out, but it didn’t have time to enjoy itself before it was back behind those tall high walls. But it’s there, Will has proof now that it’s there, and surely that is something he can work with. He’s just not entirely sure where to begin, because he’s never tried this before. He is by nature solitary, needing only the companionship of his dogs. People are complicated and uncomfortable, and although he has been party to the needs and motivations of dozens of the predators amongst them, never before has he been drawn to seek one out and make *friends.*

He doesn’t see any particular need to pick away at his own reasons though. He likes the surety of instinct, how little effort it takes, rather than letting his brain whir and spin and over-clock itself until it spits sparks and starts to smoke. Looking too deep inside himself is a house of mirrors and endless over-analysis. Leave that for picking apart outside influences.

So what next? He will have to go back to the source, to Hannibal Lecter himself, to see what about him might have changed. If the chains of his self-control, having been broken once, are now weakened and warped and amenable to persuasion. Will has known persuasive killers in the past. He has resources to draw on when suggestion and subtlety does not come easy to him.

He leaves things a little while, not wanting to seem pushy or over-eager, then calls up Hannibal one lunchtime hoping to catch him between patients, with the excuse that he needs to return the files he’d been loaned. With the case over, the FBI will be wanting them back from Dr Lecter, and the versions made suitable for teaching will be available soon enough. It is not difficult to finagle a second dinner invitation out of the man, who seems positively eager about it. Perhaps he, too, has felt this strange connection that lies between them. Perhaps he is just lonely. Someone who holds himself aloof and above like that cannot allow many to get close to him, and why not have that someone be a person with no professional ties? Easier to cut them loose if necessary.

Will still has some of Cassie Boyle in his freezer, and is rather curious what would happen if he took it with him as a gift, but he is unsure – uncharacteristic for him – is Hannibal is eating meat again. He only managed to get at the edges of whatever all that was about. Hannibal is certainly a challenge of his empathy.

A date is set for later in the week, Hannibal's schedule being busy, and Will being sure he will want to do justice to any meal shared. In the intervening days, classes run as normal, with Hobbs the main topic. He does not touch on Hannibal's actions. It wouldn't be respectful, although he can tell from the curious glances and barely suppressed questions that the students want to know. He has a long-standing policy that all enquiries must be submitted to him by email however, so he can forestall the subject actually being raised.

On the evening in question Will makes an effort, although not quite sure how to go about doing that. There's a certain knowledge base required that no amount of borrowed emotion and feeling can compensate for. Not that he has ever been exactly ashamed of his blue-collar upbringing and the poverty that came with it, but nor is it something he knows how to move away from even if that was something he wanted. He spritzes himself with the Old Spice cologne he received in last year's office Secret Santa and hopes it is good enough.

"Charred leeks with white asparagus, hazelnuts and milk skin," Hannibal announces, placing the plate before Will with the flourish of a magician.

"Do you ever cook anything less than perfect?" Will asks, smiling.

"Not that I would ever allow a guest to see." He does appear in better spirits than the last time they met at this table, although the meals remain as vegetarian as before. Still, there is a certain satisfaction, like a lion in the savannah sun. Will heard that Garrett Jacob Hobbs had developed peritonitis despite the prophylactic antibiotics and has been moved to High Dependency. The conclusion made from the presentation of those two facts draws itself.

"You must be glad that this case is over," he says, knife slicing easily through the tender young asparagus shoots. The pallid colour echoes pale skin. The daughter, Abigail Hobbs, had been at the scene of the final arrest, seen her mother's death, seen her father carried away. He feels a pang of reflected sympathy for her, the echo of a powerful love. He wonders if he might ever get to meet her.

"I am," Hannibal replies. Their wine today is a crisp white that seems to slap the tongue with flavour before the mellowness of its alcohol content hits the stomach. "He was the worst kind of animal."

Will watches him, watches his eyes, his body language, breathes him in. Whatever cologne he is wearing he wouldn't know, but it has a powerful, almost sexual musk, like leather, like something alive. He sees disgust which is partially directed at the self, which could not be called hate only because that would be too personal, would be the flip side of an admiration that a creature like Hobbs does not deserve. There are associations here, memories and reflections which Will can only identify as such, useless without context.

"It's certainly not uncommon for animals to eat their own young," Will remarks, and watches the smallest of tremors run through the suddenly tense muscles of Hannibal Lecter. There is the beast, furious, hungry, wild. Who hurt *your* family, Will wonders? And who was it? Brother, sister, daughter, son? Surely the grapevine would have mentioned a child, unless it was years ago and never spoken of, which is equally likely.

“We are made up of the things that distinguish us from our animal ancestors,” Hannibal says stiffly. “Our cognitive abilities are only the beginning of that. The great blessing of the human race is the society we have built and which we are constantly improving upon. Without it, we have an intrinsic cruelty which only other intelligent animals can match.”

“Dolphins butting porpoises to death,” Will offers. “Chimpanzee packs going to war against each other.”

“We construct rules and taboos to protect ourselves from ourselves. Killers like Hobbs break those taboos, and make themselves into the monsters we tell legends to warn about.”

“Then it’s a good thing we have the guard dogs to chase the wolves away,” Will says with a sardonic smile, thinking about the evolutionary origins of the domestic canine. Is that what Hannibal has been doing to himself? Trying to tame the wolf he so clearly is? His sheep’s clothing is at least a little fancier than Will’s.

Hannibal uses the distraction of his wine to consider his answer. Will has noticed that little habit. He is worried about what he did, or at least what other people will think of what he did.

“For all the benefits of civilisation,” Will continues, a puff of feathers on the lure, “I suppose sometimes violence does need to be answered with violence.”

“It was regrettable,” Hannibal says quietly.

“If the dogs don’t chase down the wolves, then the wolves win,” Will says, and hopes he is not deluding himself seeing the idea flicker and take root behind the other man’s eyes.

That night, Will dreams. His imagination has always been a garden of fantasies, where he can play out murders behind his eyes and construct labyrinths of metaphor. Someone once told him, mistaking his stupefied expression of wonder, that the price of imagination is fear. They could not have been more wrong.

Hobbs staggers across his line of sight, his intestines pooling in wet, slick ropes from the gutting slice up his belly. From his receding hairline sprout antlers, but this stag is young and his tines small and few. In the branches of the sparse bare trees above, fat glossy ravens chuckle and caw, watching his progress with beady interested eyes. Far off, there is a low growling moan that fills the air, reverberates with bass through Will’s chest. It rises and falls with a strange whirr. Hobbs glances back, and whimpers with fear.

There is a shadowy shape between the trees. It has fur, perhaps, and it is hunger-thin, perhaps, and something small follows silent at its heels, perhaps. It has antlers too, but these are a crown, an old and canny beast of years that has eluded every hunter’s gun. Although the air is cold and steam gushes from Hobbs’ mouth with each shuddered breath, nothing comes from the creature or its little shadow. It opens its mouth, and Will catches a flash of red tongue and white teeth, serrated, carnivorous.

It is tracking the trail of blood its prey leaves behind it, and it is only a matter of time.

When Will wakes up, he has a plan.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

> Apologies for the delay. It's not even that I was busy with work, just obsessed with trying to conquer the world in Crusader Kings 2. Sorry about that.
>
> Thus; in which Hannibal has Thoughts about Will and Abigail, Will's plan starts to be put into action, and Hannibal makes one of those decisions that makes Alana frown at him.

Washing up after his dinner with Will Graham, an activity Hannibal finds soothing in its simple repetitiveness, he finds himself dwelling on the past few hours. Will has come to have a certain weight in his thoughts which is not typical for an acquaintance of so few weeks. He hesitates to call them precisely friends despite this uncharacteristic attachment only because it is impossible to come to know someone without the depth of time. Analysis can be made, certainly, and a number of conclusions about them enough to say whether or not they will be interesting, but to delve deeply into their mind and inner life requires conversation. He would make no claim to understand Will; given the man's gifts, it is likely Will has greater understanding of *him* at this point.

The thought is in some ways exciting, pleasant, but in others it raises something almost like dread. Hannibal is truly close to very few people. This does not generally bother him; he is a natural loner despite his predilection for dinner parties and cultural soirées. Association with others can be draining, particularly when those individuals are banal, or dull, or ill-mannered. But although he may find the potential for interesting conversation about art, about music, about philosophy or human nature or cuisine, he would never label any of these people more than acquaintances or colleagues. He stands apart from them by virtue of his nature. It is not something about himself he has any desire to change, but he is well aware that most would find it unpalatable.

With but one exception, only family has ever fully known and accepted him, and Bedelia is like unto him in any case. They both lack that particular curse of emotional empathy – far better though to come to logical conclusions about situations, rather than relying on animal instinct.

Will Graham though, Will Graham is all animal instinct. It allows him to read people through small cues that, while often noticed by others, would not register with them consciously. He mirrors them, and thus understands them. Hannibal finds it fascinating. But the concern is there, given that they are so different in their approaches to empathy, that Will would see the truth of Hannibal, his past, the conscious choice he made long ago, and find him...

Not someone he would want to associate with.

Will might have animal instinct, might admire the methods and mindsets of the guard-dogs of the FBI, but it seems he does not have enough of the canine, the watered-down predator, in him to even be part of their ranks. Hannibal is aware of his reasons for leaving for a teaching post after all, since he had made no secret of them at the time. From what others have said, it was very memorable. Will's perception was a tool pointed at both ends, carving up serial killers but carving up himself as well, making space for grafts to grow that the self that came before tried desperately to reject. Darkness had begun to infiltrate him and so he had run from it.

Hannibal rather wishes he had not. Not that he wants Will to have become one of those animals, but perhaps he might have been able to inject some part of himself, seed his own mentality in that fertile ground so that there could be no fear of rejection when the two of them were just enough alike, but different enough to be complimentary. Metaphorically speaking, God made Man in his image, but not as a copy.

Not that Hannibal is looking for an acolyte. God walked with Adam in the garden in Genesis, and they were friends.

Difficult to be friends with Bedelia when the two of them are using each other, a fact of which he is not unaware. He suspects she thinks of him as a project, a work in progress. Given that she moulds only the outer aspect of him, he doesn't mind, since it serves his own interests too. Nor can one be friends with family, in the deep sense of the word. Of course he is friendly with his Aunt and Uncle and with Inspector Popil, and he cares for them and contacts them often, but in the interests of living his own life he could not stay in France forever.

Beverly Katz and Alana Bloom fall somewhere in between, where they are almost friends, and treat each other in the way of friends, but still he lets them see only the veil and not what lies beneath it. So really, there is no-one. Before he met Will, before he saw opportunity, he hadn't thought it mattered. Now he is becoming aware of a particular kind of emptiness, an ache. Small but bothersome. It catches him off guard, and he is not sure what, aside from Will's continued presence in his life, might assuage it.

He sighs audibly, although with a certain contentment. He foresees a great many more dinners for two in his future.

On the day when Garret Jacob Hobbs has recovered enough to be removed from the High Dependency Unit, Alana Bloom comes to visit him. Although Hannibal would have liked to have his mood improved by her presence, she has not come entirely upon a social call. Instead she brings news of the progression of the case. More evidence has come to light. Hobbs owned a hunting cabin, as Hannibal had posited, and it had been obvious he had been carrying out his post-mortem work there.

"I've brought pictures, in case you wanted to see them," Alana says, gesturing to her bag. His eyes follow the motion of her hand as he considers the question. He is curious, but equally with his recently increased awareness of his own physiology, he is aware that a fine sweat is beginning to prick up through his skin at the idea, accompanied by an unpleasant nausea.

There was another cabin where humans became food, and the one would link to the other in his memory.

“Perhaps it is best if I do not,” he tells her. “After what happened, it would be better for me to avoid further involvement in this case.”

Alana frowns at him, concerned. “I’m sorry you had to do that,” he says softly. “I know you; I know you’re not a violent person. You were forced to do something that *anyone* would find traumatic. You deserve the time to recover from that.”

“Do you believe Jack will be so understanding?” Hannibal asks. Certainly he was not with Will Graham. Alana’s lips thin. She is well aware of Jack Crawford’s faults.

“I’ll talk to Jack,” she replies. “Although he’s still worked up about Abigail...”

“What about Abigail?” he asks when she does not continue.

Alana hesitates, naturally given that he just asked her not to share details of this case. But it is clear that this is of some concern to her, because she eventually says, “Jack thinks Abigail helped her father.”

Jack is not usually so perceptive. “And what do you think?”

“I spoke with her after she made her statement to the FBI. She claims she knew nothing about what her father was doing and I believe her. I think she is hiding something, but that something is probably the depth of her trauma.” Alana sighs. “That girl needs some form of psychiatric help, or things are only going to get worse for her. Living with her friend so close to that house, all the reporters sniffing around...”

“You are concerned about how her trauma might manifest itself.”

“Wouldn’t you be?”

Hannibal finds himself feeling oddly protective of Abigail Hobbs, although he is not currently in a position to take any specific action to help her. To become involved again would present a danger to himself and others. Still, she was hurt in ways that echo the ways he was once hurt, and though she is not a predator by inclination, he sees a potential in her that might lead her down the wrong path if she does not have someone to guide her. It might be satisfying to be that someone. At the very least he is curious how she will react to her situation.

However he does not lay any plans. He will take circumstances as they come, and adapt if necessary. He is not *expecting* it to be necessary, but chance, as it so happens, forces his hand.

It is a late evening after dinner when he receives an unexpected cell phone call. The number is one that is on his business cards, and the cell itself is usually left to charge in his hallway when out of office hours. His patients are well-mannered enough not to use it at those times

unless it is an emergency, and so few of them are the type to have emergencies. He answers it in a state of anticipation and mild irritation.

“Is this Dr Lecter?” a young woman asks. He does not recognise the voice.

“It certainly is,” he replies. “And may I enquire as to who this might be?”

“Oh, yeah, I’m Marissa. Marissa Schurr.” She sounds upset. Unsure. “I’m a friend of Abigail Hobbs, the one she’s staying with. She had this card on the table in her room and it said you were a shrink so I figured I should call you.”

“Has something happened?” Hannibal asks, curious.

“More like has something *been* happening! Abi’s been trying to pretend there isn’t anything wrong but there *is*. She has nightmares every night, and sometimes she’ll just, like, space out. Staring across the street at her old house. Some fuckers came and wrote ‘cannibals’ on it in spray paint. And my mom’s acting like there’s nothing wrong – the stupid bitch doesn’t have any sympathy, God, she doesn’t even like having Abigail around she just felt *obligated* – and I didn’t know who else might be able to *do* anything.”

Rude, Hannibal thinks, feeling a sharp dislike. If this ill-mannered young lady were calling on her own behalf he would have no inclination to help her, but she is not. As Alana feared, trauma has a force all its own. He has a responsibility to Abigail.

“It is clear the situation cannot be left unmanaged,” he says. “I will come to Minnesota as soon as can be arranged. I promise that Abigail will receive the help she requires.”

Ms Shurr lets out a great, heaving sigh of relief. “Thanks,” she says. “I’m just totally not cut out for this.”

Hannibal resists the urge to point out that that is self-evident and hangs up, going immediately to his i-Pad. He has flights to book.

Will’s plan has necessitated him being patient. There are factors which need to come into play before he can act, and then it will be only the beginning. This first step is about acquiring... materials. That’s the best way to put it. In the meantime however, he has continued to enjoy Tattlecrime’s coverage of the case. Somehow Freddie had managed to sneak into the cabin the cannibal had owned and now the pictures are plastered all over her site. Will pours over them avidly. Here is the room where the girls were hung, where their blood drained into bowls from a body forced onto the antlers of a stag, massive tines sliding elegantly between ribs, piercing the organs within. Careful though, not to go too low, not to puncture stomach or gut. No, those would have been removed like gutting a deer, perhaps transforming into casings for sausage. There is certainly speculation enough in the comments, and Will has been having fun privately doing a little of his own.

All this is simply the cream lapped from the top of the glass. His plan and Hannibal Lecter’s place in it is the cool and refreshing drink beneath. Now things have slid into place, and he is

ready.

Hospital scrubs are not difficult to acquire; although they can be bought over the internet it is just as easy to dress smartly enough to pass unnoticed, and then pick some up from outside the changing rooms in Fairview Southdale Hospital, Bloomington MN, since he needs to be here anyway. Then he heads to the cafeteria where he purchases five large coffees, stuffing them into a cardboard tray and holding the one left over. In a quiet stairwell he pours in powdered benzos, mixing thoroughly. Hospital coffee is terrible, it will mask what little taste there might be. Then he heads on down, where the transfer of Garrett Jacob Hobbs to FBI custody is scheduled to happen.

Driver, two guards, one doctor waiting by the ambulance that will have a long drive back to Virginia. Will checks his ID is facing the wrong way on its lanyard – so easy for them to spin around, so little questioned – and walks out with an easy smile.

“Sorry for the delay on our end guys,” he says. “Hope this helps make up for it.”

Coffee is a social lubricator, and much beloved of law-enforcement and health care both. They take the cups eagerly, and Will joins them with his own, unadulterated, drawing on more charming killers to make the small-talk they expect. The high dose of the drug quickly begins to take effect. By the time any of them realise that something is wrong, it is already too late.

Will thought about how he wanted to do this. Of course they have to die; they’ve seen his face. Ideally he’d considered large syringes full of air, but he’s never tried to find a vein before and the risks of failing to kill them are too great. Instead he drags their groggy, barely resisting, loose-limbed bodies around the corner of the ambulance terminal, thankful for high walls and hedges meant to mask critical patients from the road and main entrance. Crouching down, he pulls on latex gloves and retrieves a scalpel from his pocket. At least the carotid pulse is obvious.

When he sinks the scalpel in, parting the skin from the angle of the jaw to the notch above the sternum, their bodies jerk and screams are muffled as small moans trapped in their throats. Blood erupts with almost cartoonish violence, arcing with heartbeats high into the air, splattering the concrete, his prey’s clothes, the wall next to them. He angles their heads away from him, but even so he cannot avoid the spray entirely. Still, he amuses himself by seeing how far up the brickwork each one goes, a brutal measure of hypertension. Jack is going to have such fun with this mystery, but it is not designed for him.

Now all that remains is to wait for Hobbs to be brought down.

It doesn’t take long. Will timed this well. The automatic doors slide open and a man and a woman in scrubs come out wheeling Hobbs strapped flat to an ambulance trolley. His wrists and ankles are cuffed, and he does not seem very alert. He’s probably mildly sedated. The sight of the deserted ambulance waiting on the tarmac quickly raises confusion.

“Where the hell are they?” one of the doctors asks.

“Can’t all have gone for a piss break at once,” her colleague remarks.

“This is no joke...”

Will kneels to retrieve the little Beretta 3032 strapped to his ankle and the silencer on the other. The pistol is small enough to fit easily into the palm of his hand unseen until he gets close. It’s far from his favourite weapon, but given the limitations of the location and the need to kill on site, it’ll at least do the job. He rounds the corner of the building. The two look up.

.22 hollow-points might not look impressive, but their effects certainly do. He’s perhaps a meter away when he shoots, where even his slightly lacking aim can’t foul up. Two times to the woman’s chest, pivoting half a step to the right, squeezing the trigger again, once, twice. They both go down without the time to react. He steps closer and finishes them with a shot to the head. None of this is particularly artistic. This is all his own work, nobody else running through his brain, directing his hands, and that doesn't mean he *couldn't* do something worthwhile with them, but his goal makes that impossible.

The silencer of course doesn't deaden the sound of the gun completely, but it serves to mask the direction the shots came from a little, makes them sound further away. Even so, he doesn’t have much time. He can’t do anything clever and fun here, as much as he might want to. Will grabs Hobb’s trolley and wheels it over to the ambulance, shoving it inside and letting the wheels roll up and lock as they’re designed to. Hobbs gazes up at him blearily. Will grins at him, knowing his face must be splattered with blood.

“Don’t worry,” he says. “You’re not mine to kill.”

Hannibal does not hear about any of this until he returns to Baltimore. In Minnesota, all of them unknowing, Ms Schurr meets him outside her house, pale faced and in constant motion spurred by her nerves. Abigail is beside her. She waves to him as he exits the rental car, the gesture small and hesitant.

“I may not have mentioned to my mom that you were coming,” Marissa tells him, entirely skipping any civilised greeting. Hannibal is rapidly losing patience with her company. Unfortunately he cannot currently avoid being in her presence.

“Hello Abigail,” he says, rather than acknowledge her friend. “How are you feeling?”

Abigail lets loose a tiny laugh, thin as spider’s silk. “I’ve... been better.”

“Ms Schurr has been concerned. Would you like to talk about it?”

“I’d like to forget any of this ever happened,” Abigail replies, with force. It is the guilt then, for her own part in the murders. Hannibal has difficulty fathoming that particular emotion. For him to be guilty about his actions would require that he did something which he had not thought about in every particular, and that is a foreign concept. He regrets nothing. Well. Aside from one, very recent action. Occasionally there are consequences out of his control, but he adapts. For Abigail however, she acted not as her nature would have her choose, but in self preservation. She is just as much a victim of the animal her father was as any.

“Grateful as I am sure we all are for your friend taking you in,” Hannibal says. “I do not believe this environment is healthy for you Abigail. It would be better if you could find somewhere else, at least for a time.”

“I don’t *have* anywhere else,” Abigail replies, blinking back the threat of tears. “The only other family I've got isn't even *in* America.”

The idea presents itself with sudden clarity. In many respects it is not a good idea, but it is certainly not without merit either. Besides, it appeals to him and to the sense of obligation he believes Abigail is owed. “Perhaps you might stay with me until another solution can be arranged.”

“Really?” It appears the idea is as appealing to her as it is to him. “God, yeah, anything to get away from here.”

“Wait, don’t you think that sounds kinda skeevy Abigail?” Ms Schurr says, with a suddenly alarmed glance at him. Hannibal does not take exception to this, although he might. It is not in his nature to do what she is suggesting, but the suspicion is not an unreasonable one.

“You were the one who invited me here, Ms Schurr,” he reminds her, curious what answer she might make.

“Yeah, when I thought you were just going to say psych-shit to her,” Marissa say sharply. “Not invite her back to your house like a perv!”

“Marissa!” Abigail protests.

“Abigail is old enough to make her own decisions,” Hannibal replies. He is certainly aware of the implications, and fully intends to arrange for Alana to come over to act as his chaperone. However, although he might voice such a promise, words are merely sounds in the air, and to a young and vulnerable woman, not to be trusted. This is wise. A pity that she does not believe in herself enough to really challenge him. Indeed, as Abigail glares at her, and Hannibal watches impassively, Marissa backs down. Allows her body language to become small, and uncertain. Her intense worry, later on, when she doubts herself and the courage of her convictions, should be some small payment for her rudeness.

“Do you have much to pack?” he asks Abigail.

“No,” she replies. “I’ll be like, ten minutes, tops.”

He allows a small smile to show through the mask. It seems he shall be able to help Abigail after all.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

In which there is fallout from Will's plan, Alana is rightfully pissed at Hannibal 'Terrible Decisions' Lecter, Hannibal proves he would totally be a member of House Bolton, and more PTSD happens.

Warnings for description of torture.

Arriving in the terminal at Baltimore/Washington International and turning his phone back on, Hannibal is rather concerned to see that he has a total of fifteen missed calls from Beverly Katz, Alana, and Jack Crawford in the past two hours. Hefting her luggage off the carousel, Abigail notices his expression.

“Something wrong?” she asks.

“I do not yet know,” he answers, calling up his voicemail. The first message is from Beverly.

“*Hannibal, we’ve got a problem. It’s about Hobbs. Jack just got the call; everyone’s springing into action over here and I don’t think he’s thought about telling you yet, but someone should. He’s escaped. Or someone’s helped him escape; we still don’t know the details yet. But people are dead, and Hobbs is in the wind.”* A pause. “*Get in touch when you can, alright?”*

He should have killed him when he had the chance. Only have aimed a little higher, dug a little deeper, hit the aorta and have him bleeding out in minutes. The same lie might have held. But he had wanted pain, had wanted an appropriate punishment for the rabid, uncultured swine, and now there would be no punishment at all, not at his hands and not at those of the justice system. Hannibal breathes, slow and careful, and lets none of this show on his face. Abigail is still watching him curiously.

“Got another update for you.” Beverly again. The messages continue automatically. “*A little more information came through the line. Six dead in total. The agents, driver and FBI-contracted doc had their throats cut. No sign of a struggle; we think they must have been drugged but it’ll take a while for toxicology to get back to us. The other two doctors were shot. There’s no CCTV footage from the scene either; whoever Hobbs’ helper is, they cut the cables from the camera itself. We have no idea who it is. Jack has this ridiculous theory it might be his daughter, so he’s sent someone to check up on her. It’s way too early for Hobbs to have made it far, but he might want to get back at you if he can, so you’d better turn on your damn phone soon and hear these messages! Jack’ll send a protective detail round to your house, so you’d better be there!”*

Hannibal keeps the cell pressed to his ear as he leads Abigail through the building. Things are becoming somewhat complicated, but he is at least glad that his own presence has likely given Abigail an alibi for Jack. It is better for all concerned that his suspicions remain only the barest glimpses of the truth of things. It would be unwise to give him any excuse to investigate Abigail further.

The next voicemail is from Jack Crawford, reiterating the information that Beverly imparted, including the detail of police protection. The one after that is from Alana.

"*Hannibal, Jack just called me. Where are you? It isn't like you to be out of touch like this. I'm going to go round to your house and wait for you there. Please, phone me when you get this message.*"

That is the last of them, the other calls dropped only to try again. Hannibal considers what to do next. He is somewhat at a loss, unlike him he knows. What he would *like* to do, what the part of him better denied would *compel* him to do, is unwise in the extreme. Besides, where would he start? Hobbs has fled, and only the combined resources and power of an agency like the Federal Bureau of Investigation has a chance of finding him again. Jack will have a manhunt, and Hannibal will not be permitted any part in it. Bait is his only possible role, and perhaps with Abigail with him... Jack Crawford could certainly be persuaded to consider it. But Hannibal is quick to reject the idea. The danger to Abigail would be too high for him to countenance. Even if it worked, even if Hobbs got close and Hannibal was... 'forced'... to deal with him, it is not an excuse which will continue to distract when over-used.

He has to accept that this is one thing which is out of his control. That is unpleasant. Any loss of control is unpleasant, but this particularly so. Hannibal swallows his anger, puts it away in the place where all dark things hide, and breathes in calm. He dials Alana's number.

"Hannibal?" she is quick to answer, her worry evident in her voice.

"I am perfectly well," he tells her, soothing, or at least attempting to do so. "I had my cell phone switched off for a flight."

"A flight?" Now concern is replaced by confusion. "Hannibal, a flight from where? I don't recall you mentioning any plans to travel."

"It was something of a spontaneous decision," he replies. "I had intended to call you regardless. Are you at my house now?"

"Yes. One of the agents let me in."

Hannibal hopes they had the courtesy to call a locksmith rather than resorting to forcing the locks, but he has little faith in the manners of law enforcement when the scent of a chase is upon them. Hounds have that un-tempered enthusiasm. "Good. I will be there directly."

Alana's expression when she sets eyes upon Abigail Hobbs is truly remarkable. Hannibal cannot help but take a moment to admire it, even though he knows the force of her

disapproval will soon be turned upon him. Alana's rage, like all her passions, is not often freely and wildly expressed, but to anyone who has a curiosity about human nature seeing those emotions unleashed is like admiring the foaming cataracts of the Niagara Falls; beautiful, but one is liable to be splashed on getting close. But in the moments before she speaks, in the abstract, he watches and admires.

"I suppose now we know that Abigail isn't with her father," she says, with steely intensity. "Perhaps it would be better if Hannibal and I had this conversation privately, Abigail."

Abigail looks to him for guidance. He gives her a small nod. "There are guest bedrooms upstairs," he says. "Perhaps you might like to pick one."

"Okay," she replies, with the meekness of any child wanting to escape a potential fight between parents. Hannibal considers the image briefly and finds it good. Not that he has ever considered having a child, for it is rare that he finds someone interesting enough to share his bed, and never someone with whom he might consider spending twenty years or more. But in Abigail he has found a child with whom most of the work has already been done, and only the final polishes to the gem yet remain. If he takes an active part in her life, it would be as an artist in a collaboration, but one who might paint over brushstrokes that had come before and transform her potential into the greatest it could be.

This however is a thought for the future. If any such thing is to happen, first he must reassure Alana Bloom that his judgement is sound.

"I would never have expected this of you Hannibal," Alana says. She does not need to raise her voice to make her displeasure felt. "Abigail is a very vulnerable young woman. She needs stability and safety to recover from the trauma her father dealt her, not a substitute whose emotions on the subject cannot *possibly* be objective. This isn't only unhealthy for her, but unhealthy for you as well!"

"It was only my concern for her wellbeing that prompted my actions," Hannibal replies. He is certainly justified in doing so, and if he had not anticipated the precise circumstances of this conversation, heightened by the recent escape of Hobbs, he had known something of its ilk was inevitable. "Miss Schurr, the young lady with whom Abigail was staying, alerted me to the difficulties Abigail was experiencing, remaining so close to the site of her original trauma."

"So you decided the appropriate course of action was to bring her home with you? A teenager you have only met once, and only for ten minutes at the most?"

"I certainly never intended for it to be a permanent measure."

"What precisely was your plan? Because I can't see the careful, *thoughtful*, man I know going through with something like this!"

"My plan was to give Abigail respite from her nightmares. To allow her some ease from the ghosts of her past, and a space in which she might find it possible to begin to heal. Under more than my supervision, of course."

Alana's expression is now more pained than angry. "So it was always your intention to put me in this position. A position in which I have to appeal to your reason and better judgement and tell you things that I *know* you already know."

"You have every right to be angry with me."

"You're giving me very little choice in the matter! You knew you were doing the wrong thing, and apparently you needed me to tell you that instead of admitting it to yourself! You cannot be her father Hannibal. Not after what happened between you and her real father. I can... understand why you might feel responsible. That you might believe you have a debt to repay. But you are only going to make things worse for Abigail and for yourself."

This is an imperfect analysis of his motivation, but he can hardly fault Alana for that. She is missing several key pieces of information. "I'm sorry Alana," he lies. "But I confess I cannot see how else we can proceed from here."

Alana seems drained, understandable since the nature of the relationship makes this reprimand taxing for her. "She can't go back to Minnesota now," she says. "Not with Hobbs on the loose." She pauses thinking hard. "This has become a fait accompli. Abigail will have to stay here until we find somewhere else for her to go."

Hannibal nods, making himself appear chastened. "I hope you will at least consider remaining as well. Your presence would be much appreciated."

"If I left it would only make this situation much worse," Alana replies, glaring at him. "I'll take the bedroom next to hers."

Although Hannibal had managed to suppress his reaction to hearing about Hobbs in favour of dealing with the situation in Baltimore, his dreams are less constrained. Surrounded by a pleasing darkness, he needs only the light of the moon to see. Overhead are the brilliant stars and running through them an even greater river, marred not by human illumination but by the black fingers that are the branches of bare trees. Beneath his feet lies a carpet of leaves. The scent on the air tells him snow will come soon, but it is not here yet.

Here is Garrett Jacob Hobbs, lost and in a clearing with no trail of string to lead him from the labyrinth. He is the monster. Monsters are not to be let out.

Hannibal comes up behind him, quiet and soft, and puts an arm around his throat and a knife into his back. Wild struggles are cut short as the heavy blade, angled upwards and with his strength behind it, slides between the spinal processes of thoracic vertebrae and parts the cord, lodging there held by bone and muscle. Hobbs screams, and Hannibal presses his face in tight to the throat before him to feel the vibrations travel through his skin. Pleasure curls, warm and alive and real, in an empty place beneath his ribs. He feels assured, and with purpose.

He allows Hobbs to fall forward once his voice breaks and fades away exhausted. The man's lower body may be paralysed, yet still he tries to crawl using arms alone, dragging dead

weight behind him. In the usual way of dreams, Hannibal's hands now hold a rope looped up over branches high. He ties it with strong knots around the other's ankles, hoists him gradually into the air to hang suspended. Hobbs says nothing that might conceivably be words.

A knife has already been used, but here no tool is lacking. Hannibal hums as he opens Hobbs' abdomen and lets gravity pull the contents down and out. Loops of bowel clench themselves in the cold air and steam like living creatures breathing. They spasm in peristalsis, and Hobb's arms flail in sympathy although he cannot feel this. Necessary, lest he otherwise go into shock. The pain will come later. Justice first. Or art. They are one and the same thing. In the dream everything is warm and perfect.

With scalpel point Hannibal puts little holes in the mesentery and pulls string tight at sigmoid and jejunum (not venturing further up to save the need for retro-peritoneal dissection), once, twice at each point. It prevents spillage when he cuts through. Next a cautery blade to prevent blood-loss as he removes the gut, and it is no matter where its electric current would come from. Little need for practicality in fantasy, only what the scene demands, and what he would give it. For Hobbs, these would make the casings for his sausage, for nothing must be wasted. To spite him Hannibal lets them fall to be eaten by beast and bird, yet looking at their curl nestled upon leaves made monochrome by shadow he feels a pang that he fails to understand. He sets it aside. This is too lucid, caught just above the black deeps of his subconscious.

It does not matter. He will take more from Hobbs, but not quite yet. It will kill what animates the meat before him, and other things must come first. He sets his scalpel to the skin below where the rough rope chafes and burns and soaks up blood. He circumscribes, then makes his lines down the legs to meet where the abdomen gapes. After which it is a work for hands. Blood makes them quickly sticky as it dries in the cool air, but he does not mind it. Much better is the feeling of connective tissue parting with the force of questing fingers and the edge of his palm. The skin comes away as he pulls, needing only the little nick of the knife to sever a stubborn nerve or vessel. Below, Hobbs makes dull noises of confusion.

A flayed man is a masterpiece. It is living anatomy, a model which moves and flexes and speaks aloud the beauty of the human condition which from base ingredients creates wonder, art, ingenuity, crafts its own gods and then becomes them. Hannibal smoothes down the warm muscle of a thigh, appreciating the red, red fibres, pale cream tendons and ligaments, strength that comes from life and exercise laid bare before him. He has seen such as this living and dead and thus his mind has no difficulties creating the particulars of the scene. Even the smell is piquant and detailed. But a corpse made solid by formaldehyde is a long way from a man on an operating table, and the small window in the drapes on a table is a long way from the expanse of the victim who hangs before him. He feels again that urge he does not understand, as an itching in his teeth, in his jaw, as something which compels him to reach his head forward and...

His eyes flutter open as the taste of raw meat and blood hits his tongue and he realises, heart racing, that the taste at least is real, for he has bitten the inside of his cheek in his sleep. Hannibal sits up, feeling the roil of nausea that has become so unpleasantly familiar, feeling an emotion which might be termed the simple sensation of wrongness. Horror perhaps, if he thought himself capable of it.

A curiosity of dreams is that one can enact actions within them that do not necessarily reflect the ideals of waking life. Hannibal has had patients tell him of dreams, usually sexual, which felt perfectly reasonable whilst asleep and yet inspired revulsion whilst awake. He does not put this into such a category. He knows himself. He knows his potential, and is well aware he would enjoy watching the life leave someone's eyes if it was his own doing. He knows it was only ever a conscious choice not to start doing so, not because of any law of morality but because it would make him into something he had no desire to be. Something animal and revolting.

But to even consider doing what those men had done so very long ago... He tries to breathe calmly but now the thought of it has awoken something very like panic and he pants like a man running a race, feels his skin prickle with sweat flushing hot and cold and buries his head in his arms with his hands tugging his hair to attempt with pain to ground him in the here and now and not a cabin where anti-Soviet families went to hide from their communist oppressors and were betrayed and hunted down and shot days before the worst winter of that decade and there was such hunger...

When control returns, sliding iron doors over the past, Hannibal gets up to wash the taste of blood out of his mouth, padding over his dark wood floor on shaking feet. The armour of Date Masamune that guards his door watches him with the dark holes of its mask in what he fancifully imagines is disapproval. It has seen many of his nightmares. Its revered owner would never be as base as his dreams might threaten to be. What was the gift of it, if not a mark of the oath he swore to his family?

A door in the hall creaks open. Abigail looks out, hair ruffled from sleep, blinking herself awake. "Are you alright?" she asks him. Hannibal stops. He must look truly unlike himself for her to comment on it.

"I am fine Abigail," he replies. "I apologise if I woke you. There's no need for concern."

He does not think she believes him, but she returns to her bed. Hannibal has no desire to do the same now. He pads downstairs, opens a bottle of wine, and drinks.

Chapter 8

Hobbs makes for a quiet passenger. A car is waiting for them in the parking area of Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge, and Will lets the other man up off the trolley so he can lie down in its back seat. Hobbs jangles his chains, feeling the weight of them, looks up at the empty woodland all around and seems to think better of running. Will smiles. He can afford to, with everything going so well.

The drive from Minnesota to Virginia is a long one, better split over two days, but knowing he will be expected back at Quantico to teach Will makes that stop as short as he can. He catches a quick nap, four hours deep as a dead man in an ask-no-questions motel, forking over cash and leaving his prisoner locked up to make himself comfortable inside the car, blanket thrown over him from head to toe. When he heads out again, it's with a big cup of bad takeaway coffee, sugar-loaded and gulped down almost hot enough to burn. The night is long and he drives through dark and empty stretches with headlights marking the path in front of him and reducing the whole of existence to this tiny bubble, everything quiet, hearing only the noise of two sets of breathing, never quite in synchrony.

He reaches the cabin in the early morning twilight, under the shadows of the trees and the slivered arc of the moon pale against the lightening sky. Will pulls Hobbs out of the car onto legs that stagger and lock, numbed by cramp and the confined space, and guides him carefully around the side of the building to the door down to the basement. He tosses the key to the man and motions him to open it.

The quiet moan from the other occupant would not have been heard on a windy day, but it is still and silent and the low noise permeates up like something less than human. Its owner is, now, less than human. Will grabs Hobbs by the collar of his jumpsuit, which is dark blue rather than too-obvious orange, and guides him down the steps, treacherous in the dark.

"Who else is down here?" Hobbs asks, his voice scraping in his throat, the first time he's spoken since Minnesota.

"Nobody who matters," Will replies. At the bottom of the stairs he flicks on the light. Ribs are standing stark and proud now, jutting ugly from the captured man's grimy skin. It is the kind of sight that shocks – Will is used to it, of course – a person reduced to bones and connective tissue, an animate skeleton. He can smell sickness and infection. Sores will develop, from knees and elbows pressed always against concrete, and from sharp urea when they cannot relieve themselves anywhere but there in the cage. Hobbs twists violently in his grasp, but Will was anticipating it, and doesn't let him break loose.

"I'm not going to do the same to you," he says to reassure him. "Like I said, it's not for me to decide what to do with you. I'm just keeping you for the fulfilment of somebody else's design."

"What are you *talking* about?"

Will doesn't answer that. There are degrees to which it's wise to give the game away, and secrets are like oil or blood, too precious to carelessly spill. He pulls his new prisoner over to a corner where a heavy metal collar is chained to the wall. He fastens it quickly around Hobbs' neck before he has much chance to protest, locking the halves together with two padlocks. There's a small stockpile of food and water here too, to keep Hobbs alive. He can't predict yet when it will be the right time to reveal this gift, so he must be careful. Hobbs is not one of his pets.

Will leaves the light on when he goes. In some ways he's curious about the interaction between the inhabitants of that space below, and it's a pity he didn't think to set up a camera to keep a watch when he can't be here. Normally he doesn't need that kind of trophy because his memory has clarity more than enough, but although he can intuit many things with his empathy, moving back the clock to peer into the past, he thinks perhaps he would like something more concrete. Will Hobbs feel some sympathy for the shell of a man in the cage? Offer him some of his water? Without it he will not last long. Will had last given his pet a drink before the trip, and so it must be nearing death. He'll be back when time allows to butcher the body.

He drives in to Quantico, pausing only to swap vehicles again, to his own car this time. The familiar scent of dog has long-since sunk into the fabric of the seats, and he relaxes back into them and breathes deeply, taking in this reminder of home. He had left his pups well supplied, with the promise of a neighbour to briefly check up, but he still misses them even though it's only been a couple of days. He has to resign himself to waiting longer though. There's still much to be done today.

Lecturing, students shift around in their seats under the cover of half-darkness, the odd whisper passing between them, and at the end hands creep up just visible from the corner of his eye. Will sighs, impatient with them even as he understands their curiosity. Although nothing has been released to any media source as yet, and miraculously it has even been kept a secret from Freddie Lounds (which is a situation that cannot last long), this is Quantico, and gossip travels at the speed of sound.

"Questions to my inbox, you know the drill," Will tells them, although there is a certain thrill in possessing the particular, intimate knowledge of the events of the day before. Not that he's ever been the type of killer that wants to be caught. Social interaction of most kinds is unimportant to him because he's never been the biggest fan of other people, so why would he want to invite more of it, and reporters sticking their noses in his business?

He hurries away before any of the braver of them can summon up the courage to approach him. He wonders how much Jack has determined, how confused he must be. Perhaps they'll link this to the murder of Cassie Boyle, displayed in that field, the work of, perhaps, a fan. A fan who would want to see Hobbs free. That's a good road for them to go down, because it is utterly misleading. Will slides into the driving seat and yawns widely. He should go home and sleep, but one last thing, a quick visit for his own curiosity. This is all designed for one man, and he needs to see his reaction with a longing that surprises him with its intensity.

Will doesn't tend to argue with his instincts. The engine starts with a growl, and he turns out of the car park at Quantico to head north towards Baltimore.

Outside Hannibal Lecter's house there are two policemen not even trying to pretend they are anything but. When Will pulls up on the street, forced to risk a ticket since Hannibal's own driveway is uncommonly full, he becomes the object of their full attention. They're armed, standing in a mock-casual way with one hand on the butt of the gun and index finger pointedly caressing down the holster where the barrel sits.

Will makes a face, letting his lips curl up briefly, then stalks up the path with gravel crunching underfoot. He's unwilling to interact with these men unless they make a point of it, which he knows they will. Sure enough a hand with calluses on the palm and fingers is stuck out in front of his chest before he reaches the door.

"Who're you?" one of the officers asks him. Will looks at him, but lowers his head so that the rim of his glasses makes eye contact impossible.

"Will Graham," he replies. "I'm a friend."

"Wait here while we check that with Dr Lecter," the other says, and heads inside. If he had meant harm, this would be the perfect time to act, Will reflects. One on one, with the opponent distracted by his colleagues'' absence... One would think FBI liaisons would be better trained, or at least there should be more of them. Somehow though Will thinks Hannibal would be entirely capable of taking care of himself, if it became necessary.

"Will?" Not Hannibal, but another voice he knows. Will turns to look at the woman standing in the doorway.

"Hi Alana," he replies with a smile that is strained just so. For her he likes to play up his vulnerability because it calls to her nurturing instincts and makes her discount any slight sense of unease she might otherwise feel around him. Alana is prone to overanalysing, so she will blame the prickling of her instincts around a predator on his asocial nature. And it makes Will something to be taken care of, which is why they are friends, but not *too* friendly. His social awkwardness is no lie, but it's distain, not anxiety. Anxiety is safer though.

"I didn't know you knew Hannibal," she says, inviting him in. The house is dark; the day is grey and cloudy and with no lights turned on inside the rich colours of the walls seem to swallow up the shadows.

"It was a chance meeting," Will says. "You've mentioned him before, so when I saw his name-badge we got to talking. I suppose we find each other interesting."

"I wouldn't have expected you two to get along," Alana says cautiously.

"Because he's a psychiatrist?" Will ducks his head, smiles, performs. "He's restricted his curiosity to the personal, not the professional." Something which he knows Alana finds herself unable to do, and blames herself for. He isn't trying to be cruel, but sometimes he has a need to test people and see how they react almost to check that he's been right about them. Make sure his empathy is as reliable a barometer as it's ever been.

“Well... I’m glad,” Alana replies, after a moment in which she is off-balance.

“Glad that my number of friends has increased from one to two?” he says with a wry smile, then before she can protest or apologise; “Yeah, I’m glad too. It’s... good. I think.”

At which point they make it to Hannibal’s kitchen, where the man himself is flipping pancakes thin as tissue paper. A pitcher of fresh orange juice, a big cafetière of percolating coffee, a glass bowl of melted chocolate sitting over a pan of water on low heat, and a strange young woman Will doesn’t know complete the breakfast-for-lunch tableaux lying before him.

“Will,” Hannibal says, with only the slightest widening of his eyes and moment of stillness to show his surprise. Well, that and the way the latest crepe misses its landing, hanging over the lip of the pan and requiring Hannibal to jiggle it back onto the flat with a rough shake of the wrist and a little encouragement from a spatula.

“I... heard what happened,” he says, shoving his hands into his pockets, allowing social awkwardness. “Gossip at the FBI. I thought I should come.”

“Of course I am glad to have you,” Hannibal replies, and his body language is easy and open. A little smile flickers at the edges of his mouth, and his eyes are as warm as it is possible for them to be. “This is Abigail Hobbs,” he says, nodding to the young woman, and Will sees it now. He wasn’t looking before. She has the look, that golden ticket look, pale and pretty with long brown hair. Her feeble smile is a wounded thing limping along so as not to give predators ideas. For a moment, Will envisions Hobbs as a figure standing behind her with his hand on her shoulder, a proud father who looks at her with a loving hunger, and he sympathises. But this is not the place, and so he puts the eidolon of that killer in his mind aside.

“Abigail, this is Will Graham,” Hannibal continues. “A friend of mine. He lectures for the FBI.”

“Hiya,” she says, making an effort to be cheerful, although this is a general coping mechanism, not merely for his benefit.

“Would you care to join us for the meal?” Hannibal asks. “The events of yesterday were rather fraught for all concerned, leading to a well-deserved morning in bed.”

“Hence just having breakfast now,” Will says. “Of course I’ll eat; you’re cooking.”

Hannibal turns the latest crepe out onto a new plate, and gestures to more bowls which Will had not previously noticed, containing honey and slivers of almonds. “The chocolate, while pleasant, is for younger palates,” Hannibal says quietly to him as he passes it over, their bodies close enough to feel a quick shock of intimacy. Will takes the moment to study him more closely. Although Hannibal is putting on a good act, there is tension around his eyes and held in the muscles of his shoulders and back, and he does not look well-rested. He is not unaffected by the news of Hobbs’ escape and while this is hardly the setting to get into particulars, Will can only hope his reaction will be the kind that is open to the truth.

Because it is the truth that Hannibal Lecter is a predator, although for some reason related to his past he is trying desperately not to be. Some trauma has stunted the perfect killer that Will can sense lurking just beneath the surface, something wild and glorious that deserves to make the kind of art in death Will knows he's capable of. But Hannibal's self-control won't be put aside for just anything.

Still, none of this requires more of him in just this instant than sitting perched against a counter in Hannibal's kitchen eating fucking delicious pancakes with a tiny elegant fork, so Will lives in the moment and simply enjoys it.

It was a pleasant surprise to have the honour of Will's company on this particular day. Hannibal found him oddly comforting, expressing his sympathy merely in his expression and the language of his body without resorting to painful platitudes that would have sounded hollow from his lips. He leaves after they have eaten, but neither Alana nor Abigail will be going anywhere in the near future.

"I'm going to need an overnight bag," Alana tells him, once Abigail has returned to her room with her laptop and vague mentions of Netflix. "And someone should tell Jack about this."

"It will be better coming from you," Hannibal tells her. "Although I have Jack's respect so do you, and he has known you for longer. Besides, you can be objective."

"Nice to hear you admit that maybe you can't." She looks at him softly. "Hannibal, it's fine to admit you've been affected be something like this. Don't let your experience of violence overwrite your better instincts."

"When it is possible to ensure Abigail's safety, then it might be acceptable to find her somewhere more suitable," Hannibal offers. Although by then, he will have already bound them together, begun to guide her as she ought to be guided. If he lets her go, then like a thing which loves she will return of her own accord.

"I'll start looking into things," Alana says. "I'll be back in a few hours."

Once she is gone Hannibal tidies up, washing dishes to allow himself space to think. He is curious as to who might possibly have had both means and motive to effect Hobbs escape. He reminds himself that there was one murder for which they have not accounted, a girl impaled on a stag's head in a field, a piece of theatre. The individual who did that, the critic of Hobbs' work, might have wanted a further connection with him. If so, then he thinks the outcome for Hobbs himself will not be so good.

This... irritates him. Irrationally, he wants Hobbs' fate to be by his own hand, whether that be the justice made possible by capture at the end of a knife, or that which haunts the small hours of the night. He shies away from thinking about that too closely. How long before Hobbs' body turns up? Perhaps it never will, if their Copycat is as careful as before, and certainly they can link him to no other crimes despite the fact that his was not the hand of an amateur. Or if his critique is to become more personal and pointed, he will want a body to be found.

Would that result in some sense of closure? Perhaps Hannibal will be able to convince himself that it can.

Jack does, eventually, call him with several updates, but only once the trail has gone cold. The stolen ambulance has turned up in a National Park not too far away from the hospital, and who knows where they went from there. Abigail has been cleared of suspicion on this charge at least as a result of his helpful alibi, but Hannibal can tell Jack still does not trust her. She will be watched, as will he, and the Hobbs' neighbourhood, in case the man returns to seek revenge or the object of his fixation. A man-hunt has been organised, but Jack has more faith in it than he does.

Another case has presented itself just recently; a group of boys found a number of corpses in a State Forest in Maryland, buried alive as the substance for a crop of mushrooms. Since Jack himself is understandably rather occupied, he has passed it on to one of his protégées, a Ms Miriam Lass. Hannibal thinks he met her once, a rather driven young woman who held Jack in rather higher regard than he deserves. He is sure she will do well with the opportunity she has been given.

All he can do is wait and see if there will be any dénouement to this business with Hobbs. The sense of not being in control, or being prey to the whims of outside forces, is the worst part of this. There is not much he can do to help it. He plays the harpsichord, running through old compositions and personal favourites to keep his hand in. He cooks for Abigail – initially worrying about the lack of meat which after his latest nightmare he still cannot bare to bring back into his menu – but when he asks her she tells him of her recent realisation of what 'honouring every part' of his victims must have meant, and that the absence is perfectly fine with her, and he must struggle not to let his reaction show on his face.

This is a holding pattern, and although it seems that something must break soon, Hannibal is mindful that such things may also dissipate as slowly as lifting fog, leaving those affected unsettled and struggling to regain equilibrium. His impatience changes not a thing. This is at the whims of time and fate.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

> In which Abigail is feeling guilty and conflicted, Will lies about his motives, making out happens, and Hannibal returns to profiling on the FBI's dime.
>
> (aka I finally got these two fuckers to kiss)

Days pass, one week becomes two. Hannibal lives much as he has always lived, helping his patients, cooking, listening to records that spin softly and cleanly unwinding the music carved upon them into notes that glisten comfortingly on the air, putting thoughts about Hobbs out of his mind as best he can. Thoughts of one particular Hobbs, in any case. Abigail Hobbs is withdrawn in the way common to teenagers, but they orbit one another in the empty spaces of his home, aware of the movements of the other and compelled to move in angled paths by a specific emotional gravity of what they are to the other. Hannibal is willing to give her time. Since her father remains on the loose, Alana does not press too hard to remove her from his power, and so he has that time to spare.

One morning, he comes down into his kitchen to find her waiting for him, leaning against the counter with her hands laid folded before her, fingers curling delicately around each other. She registers his presence only when he speaks, for the soft pad of his bare feet on the flagstones is utterly silent.

“Hello Abigail.”

Her head jerks up. There is a determined set to her features; lips pressed into a thin line, brows pulled downwards in concern. Her hands twitch as though they want to twist together in revealing anxiety, body betraying its owner’s wishes for calm. Hannibal has a particular loathing for that mastery of the physical over mental these days.

“I’m really glad you let me come stay with you,” Abigail starts off by saying, complimentary prelude to something perhaps rather less so. “And I’m glad Marissa called. I thought it would be easier... I thought I would be stronger...” She pushes the line of thought aside with a toss of her head, the loose ends of her long hair flicking with the movement. Hannibal watches her curiously.

“There is no shame in an honest reaction to trauma,” he says.

“That’s not what I want to talk about though,” she replies. “I want to talk about my dad.”

Hannibal now has some idea of where this might be going, but he plays the part of innocence all the same, if only to see how she reacts. “Are you worried that he will come here? It’s an

understandable fear. Even knowing that your location has not been made public is insufficient to quell the instinctual perception of danger...”

Abigail shakes her head. “Not that either. I want to talk about why you tried to gut him.”

“Not why I stabbed him?” Hannibal asks, amused. Abigail is showing herself to be quite perceptive. More so than he might like in someone else, but considering their close contact for the past few weeks, he supposes it is not such a surprise that she saw flashes of what he really is. The tears in his human veil are slow to stitch themselves back together.

“I read what happened on Freddie Lounds’ website,” Abigail says. “She says stabbed but... I saw how you reacted when you heard he went missing, although I didn’t know that’s what it was at the time.”

“I acted only in self-defence,” Hannibal says mildly.

“You’re not acting like someone who acted in self-defence now!” she replies, emotion escaping into her voice.

“What do you imagine my motives might be?”

“I think you were... angry, but I don’t know why,” she says, regaining control and now picking her words with care. “I think you wanted to kill him, and you were going to, but there was a witness so you couldn’t. I think otherwise you wouldn’t have been so calm when you went back to the house and saw me there and knew... all that stuff about me. ...I guess whatever made you want to kill my dad didn’t make you want to kill me.”

“A lot of people, knowing the truth about your father’s actions, would have liked to see him dead. You were complicit, but you had little choice in the matter. You are a victim in all this, Abigail. If I had more faith in the discernment of people like Ms Lounds, I would not have made any effort to encourage you to hide what you have done, but alas others do not have the understanding that nothing of a killer is innate in you, whatever you might have come to believe.”

“He was my dad,” Abigail says, tears making her eyes gleam in their wetness. “How can I not be like him? After everything he did, I still love him, and that’s wrong. If you were going to kill him because of what he did, you should kill me too!”

“Abigail,” Hannibal says, soothing, stepping around the counter to gather her into his arms. “Nothing could be further from the truth.”

“Why not? How do you even know?”

“I know what monsters are,” Hannibal tells her. “Your father was a monster. You are not a monster. You will survive what you did and what was done to you.”

“And... and what about you?” she whispers. “I’m so afraid. I’m afraid you’ll turn out to be like him. Acting like you care, but it’s only a mask over something rotten.”

“I am *nothing* like your father.”

Will Graham comes again to visit. Not dinner on this occasion, merely drinks in front of the fire and pleasant company. Hannibal invites him in, smiling, feeling a little of the concern regarding Hobbs from the past weeks lift slightly. Will is utterly unconnected with that case and so he appears like a refreshing zephyr wafting away clouds and filling the space left behind with his own presence. Also his awful Old Spice aftershave, but some small foibles must be accepted in ones companions. Although perfection should always be strived for, it can never be achieved.

He is aware he thinks of Will already in over-fond terms. He cannot help it. There is something intoxicating about this man, about the knowledge of what he can do and the way that he thinks, which is not even approaching the simple facts of animal attraction. When Will rolls up his sleeves in the warmth, Hannibal admires the corded muscle of his forearms, moving beneath skin in the shifting firelight as he tilts his glass of scotch back and forth.

“Only the best for Hannibal Lecter and his guests,” he says with amusement.

Still it is unlike Hannibal to think in these terms, or at least think so soon. It took him some months of acquaintance to start to appreciate the silken fall of Alana’s hair, the way her dresses hugged her waist and thighs, framed her breasts. By which point she believed he thought of her only as a friend, and brushed off his later attempts at flirtation as mere play. A missed opportunity, but one cannot force his rare manifestations of lust.

“Are you worried about Hobbs?” Will asks him suddenly, then looks contrite. “That wasn’t very tactful of me, I’m sorry.”

“Curiosity is generally to be encouraged,” Hannibal replies, setting down his own glass lightly. He finds himself compelled towards the truth, but the truth is dangerous, the truth may drive Will Graham away. “I would not quite say worried. Rather, I am concerned about his whereabouts, and I am concerned for Abigail’s safety.”

“But not for your own safety,” Will says.

Hannibal hesitates. “No.”

Will snorts into his scotch. “I suppose you wouldn’t be after the last time you two met. Must be nice, having the confidence to do what’s necessary.”

“It wasn’t necessary,” Hannibal says, and the double meanings slide against each other with a frisson of tension. Saying both, ‘I could have simply disarmed him, but I chose the path of blood’, and, ‘I wish it hadn’t happened like that, I should have acted otherwise’. Both are true, only one is safe to admit.

Will shrugs. “Doing bad things to bad people feels good. I don’t think many would blame you for righteous anger. I wouldn’t.”

“Advocating vigilante justice Will?”

“I’ve seen a lot of terrible killers do a lot of terrible things,” Will replies, meeting his gaze long enough to reveal an unexpected hardness. “I wanted so badly to be able to do something to stop them. It was always about saving lives more than about justice. But no matter how hard I tried, there were always the ones I *couldn’t* save. That’s why I left and why I won’t let Jack drag me back into it. If you see something happening, if you have that opportunity, then you’ve got a responsibility to act, don’t you?”

Most people do not acknowledge such a responsibility, as Hannibal knows from personal experience. It is always someone else’s problem when they come to drag away the dissenters, the politicals, the bourgeois. It is fear, and all the rules of a society distorted and mutilated which ought to prevent the ravages of animals in human form. Vigilante justice would have been of great benefit to him then, or perhaps it would only have delayed the outcome. He had wanted, after, to leave France and head east instead of west but in the chaos of perestroika the trail had turned cold, and his hopes with it. There had always been those (*Mischa*) whom he could not save.

“No room for misunderstandings in the moment of decision,” he says, instead of approaching that particular part of his past. “Justice is imperfect and slow, but it is a creation of human logic and reason, not our base animal instincts. Order over chaos.”

Will smiles, and it is melancholy. “And I couldn’t accept that. I hadn’t trusted my instincts when I was on the police force in New Orleans, hesitated to pull the trigger, and my partner died because of it. So when I left and came to work for the FBI I decided it would be different, but it wasn’t different enough.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that.” He is; not sorry for the death of a stranger, but sorry for the emotional distress it clearly caused Will. Otherwise it would simply be a platitude, socially expected.

“Can’t change the past,” Will says. “*Can* change the future.” He takes a slug of scotch then holds up the now-empty glass. “Might my future include more of this?”

Hannibal chuckles, partly because there will be no need for the business of comforting the grieving, which he is not good at and finds unpleasant, though perhaps it would be less so if it were Will. “The future contains many pleasant things,” he replies, and fetches the bottle. When he pours he finds himself needlessly steadying Will’s hand with his own. The touch of skin on skin fills up his awareness.

“Am I imagining one of those pleasant things,” Will says quietly. Hannibal looks up and finds him leaning forward, his lips moving sensually around the words, soft and pink. His breath hovers, momentarily trapped in his throat, but the rest of him acts without thought, setting the scotch aside, closing the distance, moving his hand from Will’s hand to the back of his neck as their mouths meet each others’ with heat.

“This is no illusion of your imagination Will,” Hannibal says when they part, still so close, leaning forehead to forehead and breathing in that space of air from lung to lung.

“I couldn’t be sure... my empathy isn’t as good outside of certain specifics.”

“Is this too fast?” Hannibal asks, unsure of how the rules might in this situation be arranged. That variety is one of those things which put him off from such endeavours, but Will is awkward enough with social rules to be likely blunt in setting his own, and this is better. Honesty and clarity rather than expectations that he may fail to fulfil. He cannot call Bedelia every time a question regarding a sexual relationship comes up. Romance is easy. Romance has a template. Sex much less so.

“I... maybe?” Will says, although with the wince of someone who’s been wrong before.

Hannibal pulls back, smiling to show Will that he is sympathetic. Certainly this, this closeness, matters more to him than sex. “Then I must wine and dine you.”

Will laughs. “I think you’ve already got the dine part down pat,” he replies. “But I’m not exactly adverse.”

“Good to hear.” This has been a very profitable evening, and he intends there to be many more like it.

Jack eventually requests Hannibal’s help on another case. Since the existing investigation has not been able to establish any concrete motives as of the time of said request, he finds it intriguing enough to accept. It seems information about Hobbs is not going to come to light, perhaps supporting his theory that the kabuki copycat has seen fit to do away with him. It will be good to have another distraction, even if Will is currently serving as a rather pleasant one himself.

A family of four murdered in their home, executed whilst seated for dinner and left where they fell, blood crusting on the tablecloth, food rotting in a writhe of mould and maggots. Hannibal finds the waste distasteful. Finds the intrusion of violence into the sacred space of the shared meal equally so. He is working from photographs, Jack having held off calling him long enough that the scene is no longer in situ, so at least he cannot be troubled by the smell.

This is a scene specifically set up to convey its own particular message. The sacrifice, the destruction of a family and all it culturally represents. The scenario so lauded by American values has been discarded, rejected. It has been ill fit for purpose, but whose purpose? Not that the family is complete. There are imperfections, as there always must be, putting paid to the lie that so many seem to find comfort in. Hannibal’s ideas of family have never been so reassuring, have never involved the absence of pain. First there was hunger and fear and speaking so very carefully and passing on their history in the quiet and the dark where no listening ear could overhear. Then suspicion, then a flight, then cold death, and an aching as far beyond hunger as a forest fire from a hearth.

Eventually family had come to mean some measure of ease, but he was a loose thread that could not be completely rewoven into the tapestry Lecter. He had civilised himself, but his uncle had been smuggled out across borders early enough that he never could quite understand the strategies that made one safe in that fear-wracked world, and that gap remained between them that simple blood could not close.

In this case the imperfection of the family is a missing middle child, run-away later become abductee. It feels relevant, but he is unsure exactly how.

More clues make themselves apparent in the analysis of Katz and her compatriots. Mrs Turner did not fight as the others fought – very briefly until subdued by the threat of the gun – she was passive and obedient even until the moment a bullet was placed above her eyes, so calm and accepting. The blood-sacrifice of a mother must have particular weight, and this did not disappoint in that regard.

A mixture of the shoe sizes from imprints found outside the house and the upwards angle of the trajectories shattering each skull reveal the identity of their group of killers. Children, who are carving out a new self-chosen family in the blood and bone of their old. Jessie Turner has murdered a parent, murdered that relationship and set it adrift to find a new place to anchor. He is not alone. Perhaps there are other murdered families in other states, connections not yet made.

The issues in Hannibal's own family life had been external; he'd had no wish to escape from it or remake it. This is a foreign motive to him, but easily enough intellectually understood. An impartial observer might expect this to have some emotional effect on him, but parallels of orphan-hood so crudely drawn would be puerile at best. This is merely another case. Perhaps further investigation will turn up evidence of abuse, be it physical or emotional, or perhaps the unhappiness will be forever unknown, but far be it for him to deny an animal escaping a trap and eliminating the threat that put it there.

He prepares his report for Jack, guiding him to look for other runaways, other sacrifices of kin no longer kin. The thought of families reminds him. An important date in his calendar will be coming up soon.

It will be good to see his own family again.

Lust is good bait for a hook, Will thinks, but this isn't only about lust for either of them. He wants what he knows Hannibal truly is, what he is capable of being if only he would realise his full potential. Will's own lies are just steps on the road, and he feels no guilt about the easy way they pass his lips. This isn't betrayal. This is seeing the best in a beloved partner – eventual partner – and trying to bring it out. If he didn't feel something he thinks could be love for Hannibal, he wouldn't be making such an effort. He certainly wouldn't be kissing him, contemplating taking him to bed.

Hannibal will forgive him dishonesty when this is done. Will knows this about him; that he is well-versed in expediency. There will come a point, he is sure, when he is on the cusp of transformation (rather, revelation) that he might be hurt by the truth, but he will see when he feels the joy of creating beautiful death that it was only what was necessary. Will doesn't actually have any doubts about this.

So he lets Hannibal lavish him with the trappings of romance and it is not all so very different to before they confessed their feelings. There is food better than any he's ever tasted, and wine more expensive than he could ever afford, and music played for him on Hannibal's

harpsichord in a room decorated with enough animal skulls that Will wonders how anyone who saw it could miss the predator inside with the taste for blood. At the end of the evening they will kiss with barely controlled hunger, but the one factor which so far has stopped it going further is the presence of Abigail Hobbs in the house.

Will isn't angry with her about this; she's hardly got the inclination or situation at the moment to go out or have much of a social life. Besides he was fond of her the moment he met her, echoes of the man he has collared in his other basement knocking around in his head. Since Hannibal feels so obviously paternal towards her, or perhaps just protective, it makes it easy for him to feel the same way. In another life, in another place, they would make quite the family, two dads and their girl grown, but she isn't like them, and Will doesn't think he could make her be. He's not changing Hannibal's inherent nature, but to make Abigail a killer, he'd need to.

Perhaps if he had Hannibal to help him...

That's fantasy though, not the certainty of a possibility. Eventually Alana will draw Abigail away from all this, into someplace safer and healthier, and that would be for the best. Will thinks it would be cruel to put her through the crucible it would need to change her, and he is not *needlessly* cruel, only cruel in the service of art.

In any case, given how much mere kisses affect him, he's not sure he can stand yet the intensity of anything more. It's better to have her here and unknowing for now.

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